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THE RIVER RUSTLERS



"COME ERLONG BOYS!" CRIED PIKE, DELIGHTEDLY, "THE OLE MAN FROM 'WAY-BACK IS ON WING, NOW. COME ERLONG I SAY!"

OR,

The Detective from 'Way-Back.

A Romance of Ranch, Range and
Revolution.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
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KING," "PRINCE PRIMROSE, THE FLOWER
OF THE FLOCK," "HUCKLEBERRY,
THE FOOT-HILLS DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A VALIANT COMPANY.

A BODY of Mexican police, dressed in brilliant military uniform, was drawn up in two very stiff and rigid lines before the office of the alcalde in the Mexican town of Carmencita.

Carmencita was, at the time of this story, a lively cattle town, situated not more than fifteen miles south of the Rio Grande River. The settlement was rather compactly built, and boasted a considerable population. Most of the houses, however, were mere adobes—the sort of houses best adapted to that hot, dry climate,

and to the people who inhabited them. There was an old wall about the town, which had been erected as a defense against the marauding Comanches. This wall had lately fallen into decay, for the days of these prairie Bedouins were virtually over. But there had recently been some attempts to repair this wall, the times being still troubled and life and property frequently rendered insecure.

The present disturbed condition of affairs was the immediate occasion of the assembling of the gaudily-dressed band of police. The alcalde's office faced the Plaza; and in this square the police were drawn up for the purpose of review. Nearly the entire population of Carmencita were gathered within the Plaza, or crowded into the streets leading to it. The flat roofs of the adobe houses, also, were covered with a motley throng, anxious to witness the glittering display—for your true Mexican dearly loves a show.

"Those fellows are very anxious to get at El Espada to-day! Will they be so anxious to-morrow?"

The statement and question were from a middle-aged man, who was seated in an open doorway at one side of the crowded Square, and at a point where he could see all that was transpiring. At his side sat a younger man, and to the latter the words were addressed. Both were Americans—the elder, William Wentworth, being engaged in a mining enterprise in the mountains some miles away, while the younger, whose name was Giles Jessup, was comparatively a new-comer in that country.

Wentworth's question held the sting of a doubt, which did not pass unnoticed by Jessup.

"Do you not think they will try to find El Espada? I have been wondering about that, and doubting it myself."

El Espada, which, literally translated, means "The Sword," was the noted leader of a horde of marauders that had lately been harassing and terrorizing the ranchmen on both sides of the river.

"Those police are great at bluster," and Wentworth's lip curled sneeringly. "If they could capture El Espada by a vigorous wagging of their tongues, I have no doubt they would have had that redoubtable gentleman ensnared long ago. They will go out to-morrow and chase the wind over the hills, and return in a day or two with marvelous stories of hair-breadth escapes and deeds of valor—but without any prisoners! That has been the history of these expeditions in the past."

There was a troubled light in Jessup's eyes.

"If that is true—and I don't doubt it—the chances of getting rid of Peel Skinner are not very bright. And I have lost nearly fifty head of cattle by the scoundrels, already!"

Peel Skinner was but another name for the hated El Espada. He was reported to be an American, and that was said to be his real name. He had once held a position in the Mexican army, where the title of "The Sword" had been conferred upon him because of his expertness with that weapon.

"I've an idea!" and the young man looked hard at the body of police, at that moment engaged in some intricate military evolution. "If you can get me a place on that force, I will see if I can't induce those fellows to accomplish something to-morrow."

Wentworth followed the direction of his gaze. The dress-parade movement of the police was neatly and dextrously executed; and in another moment they were again drawn up in parallel lines in front of the smiling alcalde.

That individual was a thorough Mexican, though rather fleshier than most of his race. He was perhaps fifty years of age, with a beardless face that was dark and plump, and a pair of black eyes that snapped and glinted like live coals.

"How will you do it?" Wentworth queried.

"I hardly know yet. My plans are a little vague. But if I had some place of influence on the force, it occurs to me I might be able to do something. Why, Wentworth, if Peel Skinner isn't brought up with a round turn, he'll ruin every ranch on the border! It is time something is done. This monkey business of pretty marching and the like is all right in its place, but this isn't the place for it!"

This was a sentiment in which Wentworth could readily concur.

"I'll see what I can do!" he said; and then, the alcalde having risen to address the glittering and tinselled men before him, the Americans bent their heads to catch the words.

"Oh, men of Carmencita!" and the alcalde smoothed his priestly face with one fat brown hand, while he nodded alike to the police and the gathered throng—"It does me good to be here this day, and witness these movements of trained and valiant men. There is a tiger in the jungles—a lion in the hills—who lieth in wait to leap upon the unprotected. But, figures of speech are only cumbrous words, fit for the orators, and I will none of them. Rather I would speak to you as a straightforward man to honest men. El Espada is in the mountains, whither he has run with his yelping pack after devastating the ranches by the big river. He is a coward, in that he flees at the approach of day. It is said

that he was once a brave man—but that was when he wore the uniform of his country and delighted in honorable deeds, as do these friends of ours who have so well proven their skill.

"Now he loves the night, and the deeds for which men choose the darkness. He will not come out into the day; but, oh! ye men of Carmencita! you will run him to his mountain lair and drag him into the sunlight that he fears so much. Ay! and you will bring him hither, that we may gaze on his face and see what manner of man he is—and punish him as he should be punished for his violations of the laws of our beloved country."

There was much more to the same effect, to all of which the police and the populace listened with marked attention, the latter occasionally breaking forth into cries of condemnation.

"Wind!" was Wentworth's sententious observation, when the speech was concluded and the military show was dissolving. "He didn't believe a word he said, and the police and a good many of the people knew he didn't. But it is the way with these Mexicans. They love fine words, just as they love fine clothes. It doesn't much matter what either are composed of, so there is plenty of flash and color and style about them."

A band had commenced to play in the Plaza, and about it the people of the town had clustered.

"Don't forget the commission!" Jessup reminded.

The alcalde had disappeared behind the blank, white wall that faced the Square.

"He's retired to his office," said Wentworth, "and no doubt is refreshing himself with a good stiff glass of *aguardiente*. Likely he's feeling pretty good, and the liquor will make him feel better, and I can't strike him at a more opportune time than the present."

Wentworth was noted for his shrewdness in his dealings with men, and there seemed little question that he was properly estimating the condition and temper of the alcalde.

He got up from his seat in the doorway, and skirting the crowd gathered about the band, made his way to the alcalde's room. The great man had refreshed himself, and was lazily engaged in rolling a cigarette. His fat face showed much self-complacency. His speech had been well received, and he felt that, politically, he had lifted himself a notch higher.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Senor Francisco, on the success of the parade. The police bore themselves handsomely. And your remarks, Francisco, were apt and to the point!"

Pedro Francisco was not proof against flattery. He smiled as the soft words fell on his ears—a smile that showed the pearly whiteness of his teeth.

"It was well done, was it not?"

"I never saw better!"

Francisco shoved his visitor a glass of the fiery Mexican drink.

"To the success of to-morrow's expedition!"

Wentworth was recognized in Carmencita as an influential man, and the alcalde felt that no slight honor was being conferred on him by this visit.

After the toast, Wentworth requested a few moments' private conversation; which was readily granted. He was closeted with the official for half an hour, and when he came out and made his way again across the street, his face bore the unmistakable marks of triumph.

"I have it," he said, drawing Jessup from the doorway and thrusting a paper into his hands. "There is your commission. Read it, and you will see that I have managed to do well by you. It gives you the position of second in command. Roderigo is captain, or *El Capitan*, as the Mexicans have it, and you are to be his lieutenant."

"You didn't pay any money for this?" protestingly.

"Don't trouble yourself any about that, my dear fellow!" with an easy wave of the hand. "It's nothing to you, or ought to be nothing to you, whether I did or did not. You have got what you wanted; and I shall expect you to do your utmost in bringing El Espada to justice."

CHAPTER II.

A DISPLAY OF THE WHITE FEATHER.

"A WORD with you, Senor Americano!"

Giles Jessup was lounging easily in his chair by the doorway heretofore mentioned. The night had fallen, though the darkness was not so intense but that the people in the streets could be dimly seen as they moved to and fro. His thoughts were somewhat hazy and cloudy, like the tobacco smoke that wreathed above his head. He was wondering, in an indolent way, what would be the result of the venture of the morrow, and whether or not he would be able to induce the Mexicans to follow the plan he had half-outlined.

He was aroused by a touch on the shoulder, and the words above quoted.

"A dozen of them if you wish," shaking off his lethargy and facing the stranger who addressed him. "I reckon I'm the easiest man to approach in Carmencita. What is it you want with me?"

He saw before him a Mexican, clad in the dis-

inctive garb of the country, and with a dark and rather evil face.

"I would warn you, senor! You are appointed next in command to Roderigo in the raid to be made on El Espada. Senor Americano, that means danger to you—bitter danger! Know you not that Dominique Gervase aspired to the place you have taken? It is so! And from henceforth Gervase will be to you as the serpent that lies in the grass. Beware of him, for in an hour when you think not he will strike!"

Having uttered these words, the swarthy-faced stranger glided away as silently as he had come, leaving Jessup in a state of amazement and perturbation.

"Well, I am much obliged to the scamp, whoever he is!" looking after the retreating figure. "This Mexico is a treacherous country, as I'm beginning to find out. But, who is Dominique Gervase? I haven't the honor of the rascal's acquaintance!"

The question was answered the next morning when he made his way into the Plaza to join the body of police, who were already gathering for the contemplated movement against the noted bandit. Gervase sullenly acknowledged the introduction, when Jessup was presented by the commander; and the American saw that he was likely to have trouble with this man, and that the warning was really well meant.

Dominique Gervase was thirty-five or thereabouts, with a not unhandsome face of the long, Spanish type. He was very erect and military in his bearing, and appeared to be something of a coxcomb. He was obviously much offended at having this American and stranger placed above him. He had long aspired to the lieutenantcy of this band of the police force, which probably made his humiliation and defeat the more bitter.

Jessup greeted him with a cordiality that seemed thoroughly warm and earnest. He was resolved that by no word or sign would he reveal to this man the knowledge communicated to him on the evening previous, but that he would watch him so warily and closely that any attempt at treachery must be revealed and foiled.

The sun had scarcely risen above the eastern hills when the command, consisting of more than thirty men, set out for the mountainous region lying toward the northwest, wherein El Espada was said to have his stronghold.

It was far past noon before they discovered any evidences of the near presence of the banditti. This was the trail of a half-dozen horses. The footprints showed that these horses had ascended from the lowlands and gone toward the heart of the hills. They had been mounted, too, a fact revealed by the depth to which the hoofs had sunk in the soil.

The discovery of these tracks produced a flutter of excitement.

Before this time, however, Jessup began to be aware that Dominique Gervase was succeeding in poisoning the minds of many of the men against him. The party had been split up, to make the search more thorough, and thus Gervase was given abundant opportunity to whisper his words of slander and suspicion.

The command to advance was given, and as Jessup looked over the crowding ranks, he muttered to himself:

"About half of those fellows would bolt, now, if the chance were given. And that Gervase would lead the mob."

But he was partially mistaken in his estimate of Gervase, as after events witnessed.

Two hours of hot trailing under a burning sun furnished work to try the hardest. At the end of that time a halt was called. The trail had grown very dim, and only two or three of the best trailers were able to follow it. Nevertheless, it was the general belief that they were not far from El Espada's dreaded band.

The announcement was made that Roderigo was taken sick and could proceed no further. The captain did look extremely white.

"It makes him sick to think he may be so soon called on to cross swords with El Espada," was the thought that flitted through Jessup's brain. "I don't know that I ought to blame him, for these Mexicans are a good deal better at bragging than they are at fighting; and if all reports are true, this cattle-thief captain is not a man to be trifled with."

The restlessness now visible some time before among the police had become more marked, and this manifestation of weakening on the part of their commander threw a large number of them into a panic of fear.

Roderigo declared that he must return, whereupon more than half the company asserted a determination to return with him.

Jessup took Dominique to one side.

"See here, this is your work!" he abruptly charged. "The men are half-scared out of their boots, and if the panic is not stopped we will all have to go back. That would be a pitiful display of the white feather! Dare you go on with me?"

Dominique's face grew black as a thundercloud.

"I dare go anywhere the senor goes!" he hissed. "If the senor thinks me a coward, he will find too late that he is mistaken. Dom-

inique Gervase never yet turned his back on a foe!"

"Very well, then!" wheeling his horse to ride back. "There are ten men in the company that I feel sure I can depend on. Let the rest of them run, coward like, if they want to. We will go and find El Espada, and give him a genuine American thrashing!"

He rejoined the command without waiting for Dominique's further reply. Two-thirds of the company had already withdrawn themselves for the purpose of going back with the captain, and the infection seemed in danger of spreading.

"Dominique and I will lead you forward!" he announced, addressing those who sturdily remained at their post. "And we will find the rascally bandit, and give him a taste of honest mettle!"

The statement was received with a cheer—such a cheer as might have come from genuine American throats—and Jessup felt that these at least were men he could safely tie to.

Roderigo represented himself as a very sick man, and as those who had drawn off with him were determined to return if he did, it seemed to Jessup that there was no further use for delay or argument. So, he placed himself at the head of the small remnant of nervy men who were not afraid to go forward, and gave the order to advance.

In Jessup's mind there was little doubt that Roderigo was really glad to see them depart, for their presence could not be anything but a reproach. Very likely he was stung and humiliated by the scornful look Jessup had cast on him, but his fear of El Espada was too great to permit him to resent it by going on. When he had set out that morning he had no thought that they would approach within striking distance of the noted bandit. That was not his desire; but Jessup, as the lieutenant, had so manipulated the movements of the police that this close proximity to El Espada's band had been almost forced on him.

As Jessup pushed onward with his men, the trail, already him, vanished altogether. At this Dominique proclaimed his familiarity with the hills, and announced a belief that he could guide the party to the bandit's hiding-place. Accordingly the piloting of the expedition was given into his hands.

But it soon became manifest to Jessup that Gervase had assumed this position for the sole purpose of leading this remnant of the police astray. The country into which they had plunged was of the most forbidding character. Great peaks shot skyward, so seamed and gashed by canyons that it appeared almost impossible to move a mile in any direction.

"We can never find El Espada in this way!" Jessup declared, thrown into a fury of rage by his discovery of Dominique's treachery.

Hot words ensued between the two, with the result that Jessup, as commander of the force, had the false guide pinioned and bound to a horse.

"Now, we'll see if we can find our way out of this tangle!" was his declaration, as he took upon himself the guidance of the party.

It was so plain to all that Dominique had acted treacherously that no objection was raised to the treatment given him. In truth, the Mexican police seemed rather pleased than otherwise at this sudden humbling of his pride.

It took more than an hour's hard toil for the little expedition to work its way out of the tangle into which Dominique had led it. Then they came upon the fresh trail of horses, and with a thrill of excitement all pressed forward.

CHAPTER III.

SALMON PIKE.

ABOUT a dozen men were reclining lazily in the shade of some mesquite trees in an open glade in the heart of the hills. They were of various nationalities, though Mexicans and Americans predominated. Their ponies were hopped on the grass near by, and the men seemed to have recently aroused themselves from a noonday siesta.

These men were none other than a portion of the band of outlaws who boasted the name of the River Rustlers, and acknowledged El Espada as their chief and commander.

They were taking matters very easily, smoking their short, clay pipes, and chatting in a garrulous way. They did not represent the whole of El Espada's band; and expected to move on soon for the purpose of meeting their commander in another portion of the hills.

Suddenly one of the men sprung to his feet, and shading his eyes with his hand, stared out through an opening. The faint sound of hoof-beats had come to him.

"Hist yerselves, ever' one of you!" he exclaimed, running quickly toward the ponies. "There's some one comin' through the pass!"

Every member of the band was at once in motion; and so rapidly did they work, that within less than five minutes not a man or a pony was to be seen. They had retreated to the shelter of the mesquites, and many of these trees not being high enough to screen the animals, the latter were forced to lie down. The ease and speed with which this was done, showed the

thorough training of the ponies and the wariness of the men.

Quick as the hiding was accomplished, it was none too quick.

In a few moments a burro came in sight around the bend of the trail, bearing on its back a very odd specimen of humanity.

As the unknown advanced, he was seen to be a weazened, little, old man, dressed in an odd and old-fashioned way. The burro was of the diminutive Mexican variety, looking more like an exaggerated specimen of a jack-rabbit than a beast of burden. But the old man was apparently so small and slight that the burro bore him very easily.

"Not much of a rider!" was the sneering remark of one of the River Rustlers.

The remark was apparently justified, for the dried-up specimen of humanity mounted on the little, long-eared beast, slipped from side to side in an uncertain, uneasy way that showed he was not familiar with the saddle.

"Let's git some fun out of the old codger!" one of the bandits ventured, with a low laugh. "He's the wu'st kind of a tenderfoot! A feller kin see thet with his eyes shet. If we should all rise up sudden like, I'll be bound the old feller'd fall down in a fit."

The prospect was so pleasing that the outlaw chuckled in a most disagreeable way, as he peered at the old man through the screen of bushes.

As the unknown came nearer, it became evident to all that he was a stranger to the ways of that wild region, and the desire to have a little fun at his expense grew apace.

Ten minutes more brought the old man and the burro in front of their place of concealment. When he had arrived just opposite, every man of them arose silently and grimly, and covered him with their leveled rifles.

"Git down off'n there!" came the stern command, emphasized by the gleaming weapons.

The burro lazily turned its head and stared dully at them, and came to a full stop. The rider was evidently taken by surprise, though there was not a sign of fear on his wrinkled features.

"If I needs must, I 'low I must!"

There seemed even a twinkle of merriment in his eyes as he looked over the threatening bandits.

Nevertheless, as soon as he had taken in the situation, he slipped with marvelous agility out of the saddle and to the ground on the opposite side of the burro. Here he crouched in a stooping posture and peered in a curious way over the big saddle at the force arrayed against him.

"Blamest country to git surprised in I ever see!" he growled. "I've had this hyer thing happen to me more'n a dozen times, I reckon. It may be that the fates have got it in fer the burro, though; fer I see that you've got ever' blamed gun a-pintin' straight at him. If so be the burro's to be killed, I 'low he'll be killed—and there hain't no savin' of him!"

The actions of the old man were not at all what the outlaws had anticipated. They had expected to see him writhe and crouch in fear, and had looked forward to getting a good deal of rough fun out of him.

"Hold up yer hands!" one of them called out.

"Nothin' easier!" and the hands at once went skyward. "I hain't got a thing that one of you fellers could possibly want, less it's this hyer hoss. 'Twould break the bur's heart, though, if you should force him to leave me. We're great friends, me an' the bur'. He's half-human, an' I guess I'm half-hoss—an' I 'low that's why we like to stick so close together."

"If you talk too plaguey much, you're liable to take cold," one of the bandits grumbled. "It always makes me tired to see a feller so precious free with his chin-music!"

As the old man had made no attempt to draw a weapon, several of the bandits had moved toward him; and these now surrounded him, and demanded that he "shell out."

The stranger did not "shell out,"—declaring that he had nothing; but he made no resistance when they, in their disbelief, proceeded to search him.

"Hain't got nothin'?" one of them howled, as he drew a rusty horse-pistol from one of the old man's deep pockets. "Hain't got nothin', and carryin' a cannon like this around with you? We'll be findin' a reg'lar field-battery next."

The old man seemed grieved at the fellow's levity.

"You want to handle that some'at keerful!" he warned. "The thing is loaded. I could have bowled one or two o' you fellers over with it, if I'd 'a' wanted—but I didn't want. My name's Pike, gentlemen, Salmon Pike—an' I'm a man of peace. I jist carry that gun because my father carried it afore me. Yes, sir, he fit with it through the Mexican war, my father did—an' him ner the gun nary a one got hurt."

One of the Rustlers was critically examining the clumsy weapon, and, as he turned it over and over in his hands, Salmon Pike watched him attentively and anxiously.

"I wouldn't have you git hurt with that fer a good deal!" he put in.

His words passed almost unheeded, the outlaws

being more anxious to ascertain if his pockets would yield any treasure than to listen to what he had to say.

They brought up various articles of little or no value.

"You ain't wu'th the skinnin'!" was the universal growl that went up when the search was finished. "Two dollars would buy you,—burro, pistol and all!"

"Likely less'n that gentlemen, if I was put onto the auction block. But, I ain't for sale."

"Now, what are you doing here?" was the curt question.

Salmon Pike screwed his face into a network of wrinkles, and looked earnestly over the crowd surrounding him before replying.

"You nighabout skeered it out of me, gentlemen!—you did fer a fact! You've put me in mind of it though; an' I'll make a clean breast—'deed I will."

"You never seen a man around hyer named Joe Dobson? Dobson must be in this country somewhere!"

A look of anxious inquiry rested on his face, as his eyes passed slowly from one man to another.

"I don't calculate we ever did," was the instant rejoinder. "There hain't no man named Dobson in this section. Hain't got the name crossed no ways, now, I reckon?"

Salmon Pike shook his head.

"If they's any man ought to know Joe Dobson it's me. Dobson come to me in Eelinoy, and told me as how there was big money to be made in the cattle business down hyer. He was mighty friendly, was Dobson, and he boarded with me more'n a week. An' all that endurin' time he talked nothin' but cattle an' ranches, an' ranches an' cattle, till he had me nighabout crazy on the subject."

"Accordin' to Joe Dobson, there was more money in runnin' a cattle-ranch than there was in navigatin' a gold mine. All you had to do, Dobson said, was to buy up a lot of cattle—enough fer a start—an' jist turn 'em loose;—an' the grass was that rich you could go in, in three or four years, an' find ten times as many cattle as you put there—and ever' blessed one of them as slick as moles."

The bandits were incredulous; though they seemed interested in the queer old fellow, and in the way in which he told his story.

"Do you know what I think?" and one of them looked him squarely in the eyes. "I think your are a grand old humbug and liar."

Salmon Pike returned his look with interest.

"It'd hurt your feelin's, probably, if I should tell you jist that plump what I think of you. Then there would be war—and I'd have to use the horse pistol."

"But I don't want to kill any of you," gazing earnestly at them. "That would be to thwart fate—for if nature hain't writ lies on your faces, ever' mother's son of you was born to be hung!"

The very boldness of the statement served to render the speaker safe. They were a villainous lot, and so hardened in crime that it scarcely ruffled their feelings to be told so. In fact, they rather liked Salmon Pike's outspoken manner.

"You're a cool one!" the leader observed. "Likely you don't know who we air! Did you ever hear of Peel Skinner, The Sword?"

The little man declared that he never had the honor of the gentleman's acquaintance.

"Well, you ought to know Peel, for he's a good 'un! He's the leader of the River Rustlers, of which we are whom. Never heard of us, eh? If you didn't, you're a stranger in the country."

Again the old man looked earnestly over the crowd.

"Never heard o' the Rustlers, 'pon honor! Gentlemen, I'm happy to know you. I hope we'll be friends!"

"We'll have to take you along with us," the leader announced. "Peel will be anxious to see you, and we never like to disappoint him."

Salmon Pike uttered a protest.

"Oh, but you'll have to go!" with decided emphasis.

"If I do, gentlemen, it may be the cause of me not findin' Joe Dobson!" feelingly. "That feller's got a power o' my money down hyer some place, an' I'm bound to run across him an' find out what he's a-doin' with it. I give Joe Dobson two thousan' dollars, up in Eelinoy, which he said he was goin' to put into the cattle business on the Rio Grande."

"And, fool-like, you let him have it, when you hadn't knowed him more than a week?"

"It's the awful truth, gentlemen, though I'm 'most ashamed to own it. I never seen Dobson afore, an' I hain't had the pleasure of seein' him since. Now, if you make me go with you—"

"Bother Joe Dobson! There never was such a man, and we know it. So, come along with us, and shut your yawp! We'll meet Skinner in an hour or two; and then you can tell your Joe Dobson story to him. He'll be shore to take it in. Oh, yes! Peel Skinner will swallow 'most anything!"

The words were mocking, showing that he did not think Skinner would believe a word of the stranger's yarn.

Again the little man voiced a protest.

It was of no avail—and finding he must go, whether he desired to or not, he sadly mounted to the back of the burro.

CHAPTER IV.

AT DURBAN'S RANCH.

THE bandits were barely under way, when there came a chorus of wild, fierce yells from the top of the nearest hill, and a force of men about equal to their own number dashed toward them. There were rifle-shots as well as yells, and the bullets sung and whistled in a most discordant and fear-inspiring way.

A glance served to show the outlaws that the charging force wore the uniform of Mexican police—and this, with the singing bullets, quickly threw them into a panic.

Salmon Pike was not slow to take advantage of favoring circumstances. He had been accompanying these men much against his will, and he had no desire to go with them a yard further than he was compelled to. From the moment the pistol had been wrested from him, he had narrowly watched the man who had taken possession of the ancient weapon.

Now he threw himself from the burro with a celerity unlooked for in one of his appearance, and rushed with great fury on this man.

"Give up that hoss pistol!" he howled, grasping the fellow by the legs and essaying to drag him from the saddle. "Give it up, I say, or I'll pull ye down hyer and make ye eat it!"

The bandits were already beginning to break into a run, seeming to have no desire to test their strength and courage with the police. They reasoned, probably, that they were not out in the hills that day for the purpose of fighting, but rather to meet and receive orders from their chief.

The yells of the police came nearer and nearer, the "zip" of the bullets had a deadlier ring.

"Let go of me!" and the ruffian struck savagely at Pike. "Let go of me, I say!"

"Then, gimme that pistil!" and the little man gave another tug at the leg.

The bandit drew it out, and hurled it at Pike with a fierce imprecation. The blow was deftly avoided, and the scoundrel, seeing he had failed of his purpose, rode swiftly away in the trail of his comrades.

Pike picked up the pistol as tenderly as if it were a thing of the most precious value; and when Giles Jessup and his men reached the point where he was standing, they found him caressing the clumsy weapon and talking to it as if it were a child.

"Look after that fellow, will you?" Jessup shouted to one of his men, as he swept on in pursuit of the flying robbers. "He may be one of them, though he don't look like it."

The man drew rein at Pike's side, and, springing down, began to converse with him.

The chase of the bandits was continued for more than an hour, although it seemed quite hopeless from the first. Jessup had worn out his horses in his long wandering through the hills; while those of the outlaws were fresh. When it was seen that they could not accomplish anything, Jessup commanded a halt and retreat.

"Now sling that to the boss!" advised the man who had been left in charge of Pike, as Jessup and his followers rode up. "Maybe he'll know this hyer Joe Dobson, though I'm plagued if I ever heerd o' sich a critter!"

Pike had been telling him of his troubles and adventures, and now, at this invitation, turned to Jessup.

Jessup smiled oddly as he looked down on this strange specimen of humanity, and listened to the words that fell from the withered lips—for Pike was already beginning to retell his story.

"I never heard of such a man!" and Jessup shook his head. "Perhaps some one else in the party has, though, for I'm a comparative stranger here."

The name was not familiar to any of them, and it seemed evident that no man of that name had ever held a ranch on that part of the Rio Grande.

"I reckon you've been taken in and done for by some sharper," was Jessup's comment. "I've seen sleek-tongued fellows like Dobson, and they were usually working some game that had money in it for them. I'll warrant that when the chap got your money, he kept just as far away from this country as he could."

There was a grieved and hurt look on the pinched features of the old man.

The day was now well spent, and it appeared useless to attempt any further search for El Espada's men. Nevertheless, Jessup sent several of the best trailers on, with instructions to do what they could, while he took the remainder of the force and rode in the direction of the river, which was now not far away.

Salmon Pike accompanied them, his little burro being able to keep up with the tired ponies.

A half-hour's riding brought the river in sight. The water was at a low stage, though near the center of the sandy, shallow stream it had considerable depth.

The ranch they desired to reach was located on the opposite side of the stream, and only a short distance below. It was owned by Syl-

vester Durban, a man who had but recently come to that region and set up in the cattle business.

The burro was loth to enter the water, hanging back in a most aggravating way, and bringing down on its obdurate head a shower of maledictions from its incensed rider.

"Go on there, Samson, will you?" the words accompanied by a series of vigorous kicks. "Go on there—you! If you don't, I'll pull your wavin' years out by the roots and feed 'em to the coyotes. Blest if I don't!"

The burro seemed to entertain no fears of such a dire calamity; but after an infinite amount of coaxing and cudgeling and threats, it entered the stream, following closely after the ponies.

Trouble came, however, when the deep channel was reached; and but for the persistent efforts of the old man, the little brute would have turned squarely about and made for the shore it had just left.

"But, when it had once entered this deeper channel, it obeyed right gallantly, swimming with a strong, steady stroke, and forging ahead of all the others. The appearance of the burro and its rider, at this juncture, was comical in the extreme. Nothing of the burro could be seen, save its heavy head and extended ears; and the old man seemed to be floating along, rather than riding.

"Come erlong boys!" cried Pike delightedly. "The ole man from 'Way-Back is on wings now. Come erlong I say! Samson's at home on the sea or on the shore; jes' as I be, an' don't ye be jealous ov him!"

His face was expanded in a grin of pleasure, a tickled light shone in his eyes.

As they approached Durban's ranch, the proprietor came out to meet them. He was accompanied by a handsome young man, known as Coates Foster, who was one of the wealthiest cattlemen on the Rio Grande.

Sylvester Durban had a very pretty daughter, and it was currently reported that Coates Foster was paying her marked attentions.

It seemed to do Salmon Pike a world of good to be able to lead the little burro into a stable and halter him to a manger well filled with the things that burros delight in. And there Pike remained for fully ten minutes, talking to and caressing the pig-headed and ungainly brute, acting in all things as if he had suddenly met an old friend from whom he had been long separated.

Jessie Durban, the ranchman's handsome daughter, met Jessup and his men at the door of the ranch-house, and gave them a hearty, Western welcome.

Jessup, as he thanked her for her kindness, could not help thinking what a really good-looking young woman was this daughter of Sylvester Durban; and after they had entered the house, his eyes followed her in a fascinated way that told better than words how strong upon him was the spell of her presence.

Coates Foster came in shortly after; and, when it was whispered about by the men of the police force that this was Jessie Durban's accepted lover, a sting of bitter jealousy went to Jessup's heart.

CHAPTER V.

DOUBLE-DEALING.

"I SAY, gentlemen, we must do something! If we don't, we might as well pull out of the cattle business altogether. Here I've lost more than a hundred head already; and if the thing keeps up, I won't have a single hoof to show for all my time and money."

There was a touch of anger in the tones.

The speaker was Sylvester Durban, and he was addressing a number of men clustered about him.

A meeting of the cattlemen of that portion of the Rio Grande had been called for the purpose of discussing the numerous raids made on them of late by the cattle-thieves under El Espada. Durban's words expressed the general feeling. All of them had lost more or less heavily, and, so far, every effort to bring the offenders to justice had been unavailing. El Espada's men were familiar with every foot of the hill fastnesses, knew every secure hiding-place, and seemed to be able to laugh at and set at naught all the many expeditions sent against them.

It was pretty evident that they had strong friends and allies scattered over the Mexican territory, who aided and abetted them in their nefarious business. But who these men were was a question not easy to answer. That some of them were men in high places had been more than once whispered, though no direct testimony to that effect had as yet been produced.

The stolen cattle were driven to some unknown point in the hills, where they were no doubt held until a good opportunity presented—when they were driven far to the south and marketed in some obscure town. This was the general belief.

Probably twenty cattlemen were gathered at this meeting; and when it became manifest that no others were coming, Coates Foster took the chair and called the assembly to order.

The meeting was held in one of Foster's big bunk-houses, his ranch being as central a point

as any. It was located some twenty miles from Durban's, and up the river.

"Gentlemen, I await your pleasure!" and Foster smiled his sweetest, as he looked at the men before him.

It was commonly understood that Foster was to preside;—hence, no one else was named for the chairmanship.

A secretary was appointed, and all seemed ready for business; and business thereupon began in earnest. Sylvester Durban was on his feet almost instantly, with a vehement and bitter speech. He denounced the raiders and the Mexican officials with unmeasured severity, and demanded that something be done to put an end to the incursions of El Espada's men.

He was followed by others, in the same strain; and in a short time an organization was perfected, and money subscribed, for the purpose of ridding the country of the bandits.

From the discussion it appeared that Giles Jessup had made another advance into the hills, and had been unable to accomplish anything worthy of note. Coates Foster spoke somewhat sneeringly of Jessup's efforts; but, notwithstanding this, a vote of confidence was given the young leader of the police, and many evinced a desire that he should be placed at the head of the new force to be put into the field.

The session was a long and somewhat stormy one; and at its close the cattlemen lingered about for more than an hour, earnestly talking over the situation.

It was almost night when the last man left Foster's ranch. He was barely out of sight, when Foster came from the stable leading a saddle-horse.

He mounted and rode toward the river, swimming the animal across; and then struck directly into the hills. He apparently was familiar with that rough region, and it was pitchy dark before he drew rein.

He placed his hands to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

A light flashed out of the gloom before him, and a man appeared. He seemed to have risen from the ground, for there was no house visible.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" coming forward.

Foster addressed the man as Peel Skinner, and shook him warmly by the hand.

"I thought I ought to bring you the news of the meeting, Peel! We had a high old time this afternoon! Durban is red-hot, and so are all the rest of the fellows. I guess you'll have to lay low for a while."

Skinner laughed in a harsh way.

"I'd take you into the house," he said, "but the fact is, I've got company."

"Company?"

"Yes; one Dominique Gervase. Likely you don't know the fellow. He's mad as a wet hen at Giles Jessup, and the Carmencita police. They tied him up in the hills some days ago, and he's bound to be revenged for it."

The information came as a surprise to Coates Foster. He had been at Durban's when Jessup and his men came in, bringing Gervase with them bound and as a prisoner. Gervase had been liberated soon after, and warned to leave the country if he did not want to be punished for his treachery.

Instead of departing, as commanded, he had immediately commenced a diligent search for some of El Espada's men. He had succeeded in finding them; and, on making known his enmity to Jessup, and his desires, was conducted to the secret retreat of the cattle-thieves.

He had been closeted with El Espada for some hours; and was still there when Coates Foster arrived.

"I don't want him to see me!" and Foster's tones showed anxiety.

He was not ready to reveal his identity to this new convert. He reasoned that Dominique might be there for some ulterior purpose.

"Can't you take me to one of the other dug-outs?" he queried. "I'm fagged out!"

He got down and picketed his horse, and then followed El Espada.

The latter led the way to what seemed, in the gloom, a conical mound of land. But when he reached this, he stooped down and lifted a door, and then ushered his guest into an underground apartment, or dug-out.

A light was procured, and by its rays Peel Skinner was seen to be a man of forty-five, tall and well built, and dressed in a semi-military garb. His features were dark and swarthy, and had an evil look. In addition to his half-military costume, a saber swung at his side, and he wore high top-boots.

There was only a rickety chair and a cot in the room. The bandit seated himself on the cot and pushed the chair to his visitor.

"So, they've been having a big time across the river? I presume they didn't forget me, when scattering their compliments?"

A fierce light gleamed in his dark eyes, and he tugged nervously at his big beard.

"They stated that you were one of the blessings for which they had to be thankful!" laughing lightly.

There was a carelessness in Coates Foster's manner, and a furtiveness, which almost deprived his features of the beauty they ordinarily possessed.

It was an interesting story he had to detail to El Espada, and the bandit chief listened to it with marked attention. Nothing was clearer than that Foster was in the full confidence of this man, and that he was grossly and criminally deceiving his brother ranchmen.

The talk between the two brought out the fact that Coates Foster was well paid for his duplicity and double-dealing; and that when cattle were taken from him by the River Rustlers, it was only done as a blind, and that he lost nothing thereby.

The conversation lasted until nearly midnight; and then the rascally ranchman remounted his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER VI.

PIKE VISITS THE ALCALDE.

WHEN Roderigo and his men returned to Carmencita, they, with brazen impudence, caused reports to be circulated derogatory to the character of Giles Jessup and the men who had remained with him.

Roderigo declared that no sooner were they in the hills and on the trail of El Espada, than Jessup demanded that the entire command of the expedition be turned over to him. This, Roderigo said, he had refused; whereupon the American had started a miniature revolution among the men, and had succeeded in seducing about a dozen of them to his side. Roderigo could not and would not stand this, and hence had returned to the town with those who were faithful, letting the obstreperous American go his way.

Roderigo's cowardly adherents made haste to corroborate this flimsy story. All of them knew they had committed a most heinous offense; and if they could shield themselves by retailing falsehoods they were perfectly willing to do so.

As Jessup's followers were absent a number of days, the story had ample time to grow by frequent repetition, and to become so firmly fixed in the minds of the people that every doubter was silenced.

This defection of a portion of the police had scarcely ceased to be a subject of universal comment, when a stranger arrived in the town, whose peculiar appearance and oddities of gesture and speech drew all minds to him.

This was none other than Salmon Pike, who had come on a visit to the alcalde.

"I'd like to see the mayor of this hyer town!" he declared, bringing his burro to a halt and calmly surveying the throng that clustered about him. "I reckon, now, there don't any o' you know a chap by the name o' Joe Dobson?"

The people stared, for only two or three of them could understand English, and these knew but a smattering of that tongue.

"The alcalde!" he shouted, bending over and seeming to hurl the words at them. "Where does your boss man hold up? I want to see him!"

They knew now something of what he meant, for they could not misunderstand the word alcalde.

One of them ran on as if to lead the way, while the others, men, women and children, followed close at the burro's heels, tittering, laughing and talking, as if getting great amusement out of the old man.

But Salmon Pike heeded none of this, his attention being fixed on the man trotting along in advance.

The self-appointed guide led the way to the public Square, and by a jerk of his finger indicated where the alcalde was to be found.

"Thankee! Much obleeged!" dismounting from the burro and bowing to the Mexican with an awkward attempt at politeness. "Pardner, I'll dance at your wedding; I will so!"

There was a scraggy tree at one side of the Plaza. To this Pike hitched the burro, and then stepped forward to the door that had been pointed out to him.

He gave a timid rap, and when the door opened and Pedro Francisco stood before him and looked wonderingly down on him, he bowed almost to the ground.

"It's the alcalde I'm 'dressin'?" questioningly. "The mayor of this plaguey burg is the chap that I want to see. Pike is my name—Salmon Pike, from Eelino; and I'm a-lookin' fer Joe Dobson!"

A smile came to the fat face of the alcalde, as he listened to these words. He was perfectly familiar with English, though not just the kind of English spoken by Salmon Pike.

"You are welcome," he said, pushing the door further ajar and moving toward the interior.

Pike needed no second invitation, but trotted closely after the alcalde.

When once inside, Francisco closed the door, barring out the curious crowd that stood in expectancy in the Plaza.

"They acted just like a band-wagon had struck the town!" and the old man bobbed his head in the direction of the swarming Mexicans. "I 'low now it wouldn't be a bad idee if I'd set myself up as a show and charge a dime a sight. There'd be a bigger fortune in it than I've ever yit got out of my ranch down hyer."

A humorous gleam swept over the puckered face.

Francisco had seated himself in a very dignified way—the manner usual to him when giving strangers an audience.

Nevertheless, he could not help joining in the smile evoked by Pike's expression.

"I'm a-inquirin' fer an old pardner of mine," turning on the stiff-backed alcalde. "I used to know him in Eelino. Name, Joe Dobson—about five-feet-ten high—sandy complected—wore a goatee when I last saw him, and had a rip in the back of his coat. When he left me, he said he was bound for the Rio Grande. I've thought maybe you mou't 'a' seen him."

Francisco stared, as if somewhat mystified. This was not the kind of speech he had expected from the stranger. When he first saw Pike, his supposition was that the little man had some complaint to make against one or more of the Mexicans.

He was not given time to recover from his surprise, and formulate a reply. A hubbub arose in the Plaza, a series of sharp raps was given to the door, and a loud voice called the alcalde's name.

Francisco got down from his throne-like chair and hastened to open the door. The face of Dominique Gervase was revealed, and beyond that a mob of turbulent and angry people.

"What's the matter?" with some anxiety.

Gervase had been reported as one of the men unfaithful to Roderigo; and, since setting foot in the town a short time before, he had been kept busy explaining his part in that affair, and in denouncing Giles Jessup. As soon as he heard of the stranger who had so lately made his appearance on the burro, he expressed himself in a very decided manner concerning the man, and started to the alcalde's office.

His eyes blazed, now, as they fell on the seated figure of Salmon Pike.

"That's him!" he asserted, drawing back that the crowd might see, and pointing a finger accusingly at the old man. "There is the scamp! I thought I could not be mistaken!"

These words were of course spoken in Mexican, and when the assembled mob heard them, there was a howl of rage and indignation.

The object of this outburst remained as calm and pleasant as a May-day morning. He looked out at the vociferating crowd with eyes that held not a shadow of fear.

"I can't understand the lingo of them fellers," addressing his remark to the alcalde, "but it don't take any interpreter to tell me that they air lovin' me harder than Samson can kick. Give 'em my best, will you? and tell 'em that I return the compliment!"

Dominique Gervase, not content with having thus charged the old man, elbowed his way into the room, several of the Mexicans accompanying him.

His hatred for every one who had been treated kindly by Giles Jessup was of the most bitter character. He believed that Jessup and Salmon Pike were friends, or destined to be friends, and so he sought to wreak a portion of his vengeance on the unoffending old man.

"He's one of El Espada's men!" he cried, again pointing to Pike. "I demand that he be arrested!"

He knew the charge was false, for he had just come from El Espada's hidden retreat; but in this case a falsehood would serve him much better than the truth.

"He's one of El Espada's men!" he repeated, and the murmur of those who had followed him within became exceedingly angry.

Then Dominique Gervase proceeded to tell how, when he had first seen Salmon Pike, the latter had been riding along in company with a number of the banditti.

"We captured him," said Gervase, "and then that American devil, Giles Jessup, gave him his liberty. But he's on Mexican soil now, and I ask that he be punished for what he has done."

As the reader will see, there was a semblance of truth in Gervase's statement. Salmon Pike had been with the bandits when they were charged by Jessup's men, but it had been as a prisoner.

The story as told by Gervase and Roderigo did not accord in every particular, but to the former this was a small matter just then. He intensely desired to see this hated American suffer, and was willing to run some risks to accomplish his wish.

Salmon Pike denied the charges brought against him, and for a time the alcalde seemed to hesitate. In his inimitable way, Salmon Pike appealed to Francisco to render justice to a much-abused and honest man.

Doubtless if Pike had dreamed that he should thus run himself into danger he would have stayed away from Carmencita. He had his own secret reasons for appearing there at that time—and they were not connected with the mythical Joe Dobson.

Dominique Gervase was obdurate, but the hesitating alcalde yielded at last to his fierce demands, and consigned the old man to the town jail.

"Not as an American," Gervase put it—for the rascal had a healthy fear of American officials and international law—"but as a cattle-thief!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE PERSUASIVE HORSE-PISTOL.

SALMON PIKE was not given time to ruminate at great length on the injury thus done him, when the door of his prison was thrown open, and another was sent in to keep him company.

This other was no less a person than Giles Jessup.

"A pair o' plucked pigeons!" and Pike looked up with one of his odd smiles. "I didn't expect to see you to-day—leastways not in hyer!"

Jessup was astounded to find the old man also a prisoner. He was already boiling over with indignation at his own arrest, and the sight of Pike sitting so disconsolately on the hard floor, with his body drawn up and his chin tucked between his sharp knees, added to his wrath.

"You are not charged with being a traitor?" stepping quickly forward. "That's the fool accusation brought against me. A traitor! Bah! If there are any traitors in this town, they are Gervase, Roderigo and the alcalde himself."

Jessup had been arrested at the instigation of Roderigo, who could never forgive him for having insisted on an advance movement when Roderigo was taken "sick" in the hills. It was a chance for evening things which the wily Mexican thought he might not have again, and had therefore resolved not to miss it.

"We can keep each other from dyin' o' heart failure!" the old man solemnly asseverated. "'Twas gettin' powerful lonesome in hyer 'fore you come. A man will die of lonesomeness as certain as he will o' hemp. I s'pose we've got a lot of friends outside who'd be mighty glad to interduce us to the latter article!"

"But what are they holding you for?" There was a quizzical look on the old man's face, as he replied:

"To please Gervase; and because the alcalde can make seventy-five cents a day a-boardin' of me. If it hadn't been for the seventy-five cents, I reely think the mayor would 'a' turned me loose."

Jessup was not in a mood for joking. He felt justly outraged and indignant at the treatment accorded him; and after pacing up and down the room for a half-hour, and fuming and muttering threats of dire vengeance, he sent word by the jailer to the alcalde, asking a minute's conference.

The latter was in a grumbling humor when he made his appearance.

"I want you to send for William Wentworth," Jessup requested. "You know the man, for he has a general acquaintance here in Carmencita."

The alcalde smiled blandly.

"My dear sir, you ask the impossible. Senor Wentworth has not been here for many days. I presume he has gone to his mines out in the mountains."

Jessup was at first inclined to think this an evasion on Francisco's part, but further talk dissipated his suspicion.

"I reckon there's no help for it," he said to Pike, when the alcalde and the jailer departed. "We'll have to burrow in here like moles until they choose to let us out. Francisco says, though, that we shall be given a trial to-morrow. I'm much afraid it will be a farce."

The little man winked knowingly.

"You can stay fer a week o' Sundays, if you want to, but I'm a-goin' to slide out o' this old crib to-night."

He looked wisely at one of the barred windows.

The jail was situated in an inclosed space, some distance from the public Square, and there were not many houses near it. It was of adobe, like most of the other buildings of the town, and, viewed from the outside, had a squat, ugly look. The interior was little, if any, better. There were a number of cells ranged around a central chamber; but as the prison at that time had no other occupants, Jessup and Pike were given free run of the place.

The window at which the old man glanced was merely a square hole cut through the adobe wall and covered by heavy wooden bars. The interstices between the bars were almost large enough to permit one to run an arm through, and the fresh free air from the outside came in without let or hindrance. In this respect the prison could boast advantages over many a more pretentious structure.

"You don't understand what I mean, eh? I wasn't born with my eyes shet, if I do hail from the land o' Suckers. A free American citizen that can't git out o' that winder, ought to stay in hyer the rest o' his nach'el days!"

"How will you do it?" beginning to be interested in the old man's plan, however visionary it seemed at that moment. "The window is too high for one to get his feet to it to kick a bar loose; and you can't break one of them with your hands."

"See this hyer cot? And that there chair?" pointing to the articles. "What's to hinder us from turnin' them things into batterin'-rams?"

To Jessup it was a new thought. But there were arguments against making the attempt.

"I believe it might be accomplished," examining the cot and the chair. "If we can pull these things to pieces! But I don't like to go

out of here without saying good-by to the very dear friends who have got us into this hobble. It will look too much like a confession of guilt on our part."

This had little weight with Salmon Pike.

"I hain't keerin' the wuth o' a sheep's-skin what these hyer cattle think o' me!" he gritted. "I reckon if I'd stay hyer a year, and feed 'em honey ever' blessed instant of that time, they wouldn't elect me alcalde ner put me at the head o' the police force. Pardner, there's too much barrenness in the prospec'! I'm a-goin' out."

It lacked an hour or more till dark, and in that interval they discussed the question in all its phases. Reflection made it clear to Jessup that he could not hope for justice at the hands of the people of Carmencita. He had sinned too deeply against Roderigo and his friends. In venturing to lead that brave handful of police against the band of El Espada, he had committed an unpardonable crime in the eyes of these men.

The belief began to grow on him that Roderigo and all those who had evinced so sudden a desire to turn back when the trail of the bandits was struck, had an interest in wishing El Espada's followers to escape. It was a startling suggestion—that these men might really be in league with the cattle-thieves.

Long before the coming of night, he had reached the conclusion that Salmon Pike was correct in the declaration that the best way out of the difficulty was to break out of jail.

Near sunset supper was served to them; after which the jailer retired to his place in a small corridor near the main room and separated from it by a half-open door.

No effort at escape was made until midnight, by which time the jailer had fallen asleep, as was manifest by his deep snoring.

With the jailer, in this corridor, were the weapons of the prisoners—Jessup's revolver and the ungainly horse-pistol belonging to the old man.

Pike's first duty was to creep through the doorway into the corridor and gain possession of the weapons. This he accomplished; and the sleeping guard was then tied with his own lariat by Jessup. The whole thing was so deftly performed, that the guard was bound fast almost before he awoke from his slumbers.

Having disposed of the guard, they felt that the greatest obstacle had been removed. The jail was inclosed within four high white walls, formed of the same material as the prison itself. These walls it would be impossible to mount without scaling-ladders, and it was safe to assume there were none within the inclosure.

Near the gate, which led through the walls to the outer world, was a building of very ample proportions for Carmencita, and which boasted some architectural display. This was the home of the alcalde, who dwelt within it alone, with the exception of a servant or two.

When the work was once commenced, it was found not to be a difficult feat to break out of the jail. Some pieces were removed from the cot; and, with the aid of these, two of the bars were pried off. Then, by standing on the chair, they were able to climb up to the square hole—which done, they leaped lightly and safely to the ground.

This was no sooner accomplished than Salmon Pike darted away, with the horse-pistol in his hand. He succeeded in ingeniously forcing one of the windows which gave admittance to the alcalde's room, and by it entered.

The alcalde was asleep, as the jailer had been, and with his face turned up to the moonlight, which now fell full through the open window.

Pike seated himself in a chair near the bedside, deliberately cocked and leveled the big pistol, and then gave a loud cough.

The effect was electrical. The alcalde, thus rudely aroused, sprang half out of the bed at a single bound. As his eyes opened, they rested on the little old man sitting so silently and stolidly there in the room. The sight was enough to freeze his blood, and no doubt to his frightened gaze the clumsy pistol looked as big and threatening as a cannon.

"Take it easy, pardner!" Pike drawled, in his characteristic way. "Folks as don't worry theirselves allus lives the longest. I've poked around the world a good deal, and that's one o' the facts I've noticed."

Francisco was too much astonished and bewildered to speak.

"I've come on a little business," the old man continued. "'Tain't no Joe Dobson affair this time. Nary! It's important. Me and my chum what's been a-loggin' in the old shebang over there have taken a notion that we want to git out. And we want to git out mighty bad! We reckoned you had the keys to the gate; and that's why I've called. I hope you ketch the idee!"

There could be no question that Francisco "caught" the idea. He squirmed and writhed under the menacing pistol, in manifest fear for his life.

Salmon Pike only laughed lightly, as he observed these expressions of fright.

"Don't like my company, eh? Well, I reckon there *might* be pleasant, jist this minute. If you'll fetch out the key to the gate, I'll walk

away as soople as a spring kid. Great goodness, I hain't a-hankerin' to stay!"

Seeing there was no other way out of the dilemma, the alcalde obediently arose and dressed, and from another part of the house produced the key. He was so scared all the while that his fat cheeks shook like a jelly and his hands trembled as if palsied.

With a threat that he would return and slay him with the deadly horse-pistol if he made any outcry before they had time to escape, Salmon Pike slipped through the window, bearing with him the precious key.

Ten minutes later, they were out of the town—Pike being mounted on his beloved Samson—and hastening as rapidly as they could in a northerly direction.

As they hurried on, they heard hoof-beats, and, turning from the trail to avoid the newcomers, they saw a body of horsemen ride by.

Salmon Pike caught Jessup by the arm, in an agitated way, and at the same moment thrust his hat over Samson's head.

"Squeeze back a little furdur!" his tones showing unwonted excitement. "It's Peel Skinner an' his men; and they're a-goin' to Carmencita to take us out of the jail!"

"An' hang us?"

"You've struck it right pardner? That's jist what the villians air up to!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE BALL.

SOUNDS of music and merriment floated from the ranch-house at Durban's. A ball, or dance after the fashion of a Mexican fandango, was in progress.

Sylvester Durban, being a comparative stranger in the region, had felt that it would not be a bad idea to thus introduce himself to his neighbors. He had met many of them, and in a manner was acquainted with them, but this would tend to gain their good will. Opportunities for gatherings of the kind are not over plentiful in the sparsely-settled ranch regions.

A large crowd had responded to his invitations. They came from near and far and were of all grades and nationalities, for in the far West one cannot be choicer in his selections. They formed a good-humored and hilarious throng, and were bent on enjoying themselves to the fullest extent. They swarmed in and out of the house, laughing and joking in a rude way; and Durban, as he surveyed them, was pleased with the success of his efforts.

Naturally, Miss Jessie was the center of interest, and constantly surrounded by a crowd of admirers. Being but a woman, Jessie Durban enjoyed these marks of attention.

There was one present, however, who seemed to feel that he had more claim on her than any other there. This was Coates Foster. Yet Jessie Durban, even if she preferred his society to that of others, was wise and shrewd enough to know that she must hold the scales with even fairness, or the happy result hoped for by her father would not be attained. Hence, she distributed her smiles and kind words with an even hand—too even a hand to suit Foster.

As the hour grew late, Foster succeeded in enticing her away from the gay throng for a stroll by moonlight. The heavens were so soft and star-gemmed, the south wind wooed so witchingly as it swept over the stunted mesquites, that Jessie may well be pardoned for yielding to his entreaties.

She fancied Coates Foster. He was young, gallant and handsome, and knew how to turn a compliment as neatly as any other man. Moreover, he was rich! Not that Jessie Durban worshiped wealth! A woman may be anything but a worshiper of mammon; but if wealth belongs to the man of her heart, she will not greatly grieve because of it.

Foster was in a somewhat jealous mood. He was madly in love with this fair young girl, and her actions that night had hurt him sorely. He did not wish her to show favors to other men, feeling—though he had no right to do so—that her every smile and honeyed word belonged to him.

"It's been a very pleasant evening," he declared, suppressing his real feelings. "And it has all been due to you, Jessie!"

She detected the evidence of pique in his tones, though he had striven hard against any such manifestations.

"I have enjoyed it," she frankly declared. "Father was anxious for me to do all I could to make the time pass agreeably for every one, and if I have succeeded, I am more than repaid."

"Yet, you would have enjoyed it just as much, even if your father had not requested you to make extra exertions in that line!" sadly and reprovingly.

"Perhaps I should!" with a saucy toss of the head. "This is a poky, humdrum place down here; and one's chances of seeing people are not any too good. Yes, I think I should have enjoyed it just the same!"

Foster was not pleased with her declaration, though he had provoked it. Probably he had hoped she would enter a denial.

"I don't know that I ought to blame you!" feeling his way carefully. "But, nevertheless,

I couldn't help being hurt at some of your actions to-night."

She remained obdurately silent.

"Jessie," and there was a sudden tremor in his tones. "You must pardon me for presuming to tell you—but I love you! and it cuts me to the heart to have you speak so kindly to every admirer that comes along? God help me! this is true; and I cannot help it!"

She drew slightly away from him, and he could see that she was trembling.

"Do not think harshly of me," he pleaded. "I felt that I must tell you, though surely you have not been unaware of it. I admired you the first time I saw you, and that admiration has grown into a passion that absorbs my whole being. You do not hate me for saying so? Assure me you do not?"

"No; I do not hate you!" her voice quivering. "I think well of you, Mr. Foster; I really do! But—but—I am not ready yet to listen to such words from any man."

He caught at the word "yet," and unheeding the protest in her statement, continued eagerly:

"Can you give me no hope? Have I been too hasty, in thinking you cared something for me? Do you only 'think well of me?' That is a tame expression, Jessie!"

"I think very well of you, then!" and even in the moonlight he could see that her face was aflame. "Please do not press me further!"

"I must!" he insisted. "Tell me I have not been rash and unwise in what I have done and said. You are not offended? Assure me you are not offended!"

"I am not in the least offended!" very sweetly and simply, but in an agitated way. "But I am not ready, Mr. Foster, to listen to words of love from any one. Had we better not return to the house? Our absence may provoke comment."

He felt that this was an evasion, and again pressed her for a more explicit declaration, unheeding the warning in her tone.

But she gave him no promise of any sort.

"I hope I am heart free; yes!" she said, in reply to one of his direct questions. "That is the proper condition, is it not, for a girl of my age? And, now, I am going back to the house, and will say no more; and if you value my good opinion, as you claim, you will not press this matter. I cannot give a more definite answer to your questions. You will be satisfied with that, will you not? I do think a great deal of you, Mr. Foster, but not in the way!"

"You ask me if time will not make me look more favorably on your suit? Perhaps it will. But I make no promises. I want you, and all my friends and father's friends, to think well of me. You must remember, in what you say, that we are in a manner strangers here. Now, we will walk back to the house, will we not?"

She turned in the path, having thus silenced him, and together they strolled on the homeward way.

Giles Jessup saw them, as they came into view, and when they were yet some distance from the house.

He had only a short time before arrived from Carmencita, where he and Salmon Pike had that night broken out of jail.

He was alone, too, and had reached Durban's alone. He brought the little burro in with him, but he had not been accompanied by Salmon Pike.

The burro was now contentedly munching its feed of hay, in one of the ranch stables.

Jessup had not yet entered the house, though he was almost in the act of so doing when he caught sight of the fluttering white dress of the girl. He drew back for a look, and the tones of Foster's voice floated to him.

He did not like Foster, and he liked less to see him in Jessie Durban's company.

He had no desire to eavesdrop. That was the last thing he would have thought of doing. But he wanted to assure himself that he had seen and heard aright.

There could be no mistake, he discovered, as they came nearer, and, having satisfied himself on that point, he continued on into the house.

He had no right to question any act of these two. He believed, however, that Coates Foster was a base villain, and it wounded him to think such a man had gained the affections of so sweet and lovable a woman.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ENIGMA.

WHEN El Espada's men swept by Salmon Pike and Giles Jessup, the old man evinced a sudden desire to follow them and learn what their real intentions were. He had asserted that they meant to visit the Carmencita jail, but of this he could not be positive; and positive knowledge concerning the movements of these men was a thing he seemed greatly to desire.

Therefore, at the old man's request, Jessup continued on with the burro toward Durban's ranch, while Pike followed the trail of the horsemen.

He could not keep up with them, but he kept so near that he arrived at Carmencita only a short time after they did. He did not venture within the wall that surrounded the town, fearing he might be discovered and captured. He secured

a position, though, where he could see and hear pretty much all that occurred.

He found that he had been right in his surmise. The bandits surrounded the jail—the inhabitants of Carmencita having retired and being unaware of their presence in the town—and demanded the release of the prisoners.

They, of course, found the jailer bound, and Francisco had been so frightened by the threats of Pike and the deadly character of the horse-pistol that he had not yet ventured to give an alarm or leave the house.

As soon as El Espada's men ascertained the true status of affairs, they beat a hasty retreat. But they did not get out of the town without being discovered; and their presence there and attempt on the jail gave rise to the rumor that the prisoners were members of this league of cattle-thieves, and had been rescued out of prison by their friends.

When the robbers were again under way, the old man followed them as closely and silently as possible.

Having failed in their purpose, they now headed straight for the hills, apparently having no fear of pursuit from the men of Carmencita. They proceeded in a somewhat leisurely manner, making it not a difficult matter for Pike to keep within sight and hearing of them.

It lacked scarcely an hour of daylight, when they came to a halt in the heart of the hills. Here they picketed their horses in an open glade; and, after walking on a short distance, seemed to sink from sight into the ground.

Pike, however, had heard the creaking of a door, and for a moment a light had gleamed. The moon was far down in the west, though its rays still afforded him some assistance. He believed he had come upon the secret retreat of these men.

Thus thinking, he crept forward, and was soon in a location where he could hear voices. Before him there were several mounds; but he did not at first take these to be houses, and was for a time quite at a loss. The voices came again and guided him.

He saw that the seeming mounds were in reality the roofs of dug-outs, raised but a few inches above the surface of the country. All around were mesquite trees. The low roofs of the houses were grassed over; and this, with the screening trees, would have rendered it impossible for any one to know they were there, even in daylight, unless a close view of them was obtained.

At this instant the light appeared again, and Pike crawled up to the little rear window in which it was visible. There, crouching in the short grass, he looked through the window and observed what was taking place within the dug-out.

He knew full well that in thus entering the very home of the bandits, he was doing a fool-hardy and dangerous thing, and that if discovered he could expect but little mercy at their hands. Already that night, in their visit to the Carmencita jail, they had made an effort to kill him. To be found in his present position would be certain to bring even added wrath down on his head.

With his face pressed close against the small pane of glass, he coolly surveyed the interior. The glass was very small, and very dim and dirty, and the light within the dug-out was of the poorest quality. It was from a tallow dip, and served to only partially illumine the underground room.

The apartment was little more than a hole in the ground, and was crowded and cluttered with all sorts of articles. A small bed was squeezed into a corner, there were firearms on the walls and otherwise variously displayed. Besides this, a number of garments were suspended from pegs, and a heap of clothing and blankets lay near the door—or rather near the steps leading up to the door, for that was above, and somewhat resembled a door to a cellar.

In the center of the room was Peel Skinner himself, seated before a diminutive table, and bending above a book or ledger. The light was on the table near him.

No one else was to be seen.

"The chap he was talking to slid out afore I got hyer, I reckon!" was the old man's thought, as he continued to press his face near the window-pane.

He was sorry of this, for he fancied if he could have heard the conversation he might have gained some valuable information thereby.

No light shone from any of the other mounds, else Pike might have crawled to one of these in his search for knowledge.

He was nervous and uneasy, for the coming of day was now not far off; and, after lying in the grass for ten minutes, he was on the point of rising and slipping away.

His movements were stayed by sounds of a horse's feet. He could tell that some one was coming into camp, but he feared to try to get any view of the rider.

In a short time there was a tap on the door of the dug-out; and Peel Skinner arose and opened it. A young man entered, at sight of whom Salmon Pike started back with a low cry of surprise and dismay.

He saw before him, Giles Jessup!

He had no words with which to express his amazement. What was Jessup doing here in this den of cattle thieves. There could be but one answer: In spite of his fine pretensions and his seeming efforts at capturing these men, he was one of them!

The old man pushed his nose against the pane with such force, and breathed so hard in his excitement over this discovery, that he was really in danger of being seen or heard.

"Great gov'nor!"

It was the only exclamation for which he could find utterance, but its expression gave him much relief, for he crowded into it a great deal of meaning.

Peel Skinner shook the hand of this new arrival, warmly.

"I suppose you've just got in?"

"Just came from Durban's," was the startling statement—startling at least to the listener by the window. Durban's ranch was the place for which Giles Jessup was bound when he parted from the old man.

"The dirty skunk!" the old man grated, as he caught the words. "He's a-playin' a double game with a vengeance! But, if he thinks there hain't no end to the tether, he'll find he's away off!"

"They didn't send me any invitation," said Skinner, sinking into the chair he had just vacated. "I presume it wouldn't have been healthy for me to attend, if they had. They expressed their love for me, no doubt?"

"I didn't get to hear anything of the kind," and Giles Jessup snuk wearily to a seat on the bed. "My, I'm tired! I tell you what, Peel, I've done a sight of riding and walking to-night! A fellow would need iron legs to stand much of it."

The light now fell in a way to reveal the visitor more clearly to Skinner.

"You've changed your beard and the cut of your jib since I saw you last?" questioningly.

"Yes; I thought it would be safer. I don't care to poke my head into any more danger than the law calls for! And then, that will help me to play the little game which you have assigned to me as my part of the performance."

Salmon Pike was writhing with suppressed rage. Had the opportunity presented he would have flown at this man, and choked the life out of him with the utmost pleasure. He had seen such exhibitions of duplicity more than once in his checkered career, but never had it so angered him. He had trusted Giles Jessup—and to have his trust thus betrayed! It was more than he could bear with equanimity.

"The boss-thief! The scoundrel! The—th—"

The words died away in an indistinguishable gurgle.

Jessup drew out a beard which he laid against his chin.

"I wear that sometimes in Carmencita!" and he laughed. "But when I'm across the river I go pretty much as you see me."

"How long have you been away?" Skinner asked.

"From here?"

"Yes, from here."

"About a month, I think; and I've been doing a pile of work during my absence. If you fellows have done half as much, you're getting rich."

"Well, your share won't set you up in the banking business!"

"Did you see anything of the old chap?" Jessup inquired, suddenly changing the course of the conversation.

"The man that slings the Joe Dobson yarn?"

"Yes. He was near Carmencita to-night."

The bandit captain half-started from his chair.

"You mean in jail there?"

"No; after he got out. He was hangin' around there after he got out; and—"

He stopped and looked about in a startled way.

"I'll bet my share of the next month's proceeds that the old man's snooping around here this very minute! I hadn't thought of it before."

He got up and approached the door.

"I've got to hike out of here!" Pike muttered, in much excitement. "If I don't I'll be seen."

He hitched backward from the window, slipped into the shadows of the mesquite trees, and scrambled away as fast as he could.

He was not a moment too soon, either: for as he glided away, Jessup came from the dug-out closely followed by Skinner. They made a short search about the mounds and among the bushes; but discovering nothing, soon after went back.

CHAPTER X.

AN EMPTY NEST.

IN spite of the distance to be traversed, Salmon Pike got out of the hills before daylight, and reached Durban's ranch at a comparatively early hour. He found Samson, the burro, in his stall, contentedly nibbling at his hay. But when the old man went on to the house, he quickly learned that Giles Jessup was not there.

"I thought the scoundrel would scoot back on his boss, maybe, and git hyer before me!" and a scowl distorted his face. "But he hain't come

yit. Wonder what kind of a lie he'll have in his mouth, when he does come?"

Pike's first impulse was to interview Mr. Durban and reveal to him what he had learned. At the moment Durban was standing near one of the corrals talking with some of his cowboys. Pike checked himself, even as he turned in that direction. It might not be advisable or wise to acquaint Mr. Durban with this fact.

The discovery of this latest piece of treachery tended to make the old man more wary and distrustful than ever. He had told no soul on the Rio Grande what was his real business there. He had related the Joe Dobson story, it is true—and related it with a great deal of pathos. But that did not make it a revelation of his true mission.

Pike was extremely hungry, and as he ate the breakfast which Jessie Durban kindly provided for him, his thoughts dwelt constantly on the treachery of Giles Jessup.

"Was Mr. Jessup hyer last night, miss?" turning toward her, as he pushed a big piece of bread into his mouth. "I let him out in the hills, an' I didn't know if he'd arriv' yit."

"Oh, yes; he was at the ball awhile, though he didn't stay long."

"An' where did he go when he went away?" persistently.

Pike was determined to get at the bottom facts, if he could.

"They are going to make another effort, to-day, to find El Espada and his men; and Mr. Jessup is away, now, looking after that matter. I think he went to see some ranchmen or cowboys who were not here last night."

"Um-hum!" as he munched quietly at the bread. "Mr. Jessup is a mighty fine feller!" An' he's a-goin' to hunt El Espada? I hope he won't have no trouble in findin' of him!"

Jessie Durban did not note the hidden cynicism in the words.

"He's a precious leader for honest men!" Pike thought, as Jessie turned away. "He is so! I don't think he'll have much trouble in goin' straight to Peel Skinner's prairie-dog town, if he only tries. He ought to know the way reel well, by this time. An', so, he's out a-lookin' up cattlemen? Um-hum!"

Some of the ranchmen of the neighborhood began to arrive shortly after, and Salmon Pike went out to where they were congregated. He kept close guard over his tongue, lest a slip should reveal the secret he had so strangely stumbled on. These men were strangers to him. Not one of them had he ever seen before coming to Durban's. Many of them might be as full of deceit and guile, he thought, as was Giles Jessup himself—and to him Giles Jessup now stood as a fit representative of the Arch Fiend.

The majority of the men who had already made their appearance were of those in attendance at the ball; and as he passed near them, watching them narrowly without seeming to do so, he heard them laughing and joking over the events of the night.

One of them mentioned Jessup's name; and, with an air of assumed carelessness, Pike asked him if he had seen Jessup that morning.

The reply was what he had anticipated. No one had set eyes on Jessup since he had left Durban's house some time in the night.

The old man, as he wandered about thinking the matter over, decided that when Jessup arrived, he would state in the presence of the assembled ranchmen that he had discovered the lair of El Espada's band, and offer to guide the party to it.

This was something that Jessup would not dare to refuse. Pike was satisfied that Jessup would make no real search for the cattle-thieves, and he felt that this was the best plan to pursue.

Jessup did not come in for more than an hour afterward. In the meantime, the number of cattlemen and cowboys who had assembled had been largely increased.

Pike watched Jessup closely, as the latter rode leisurely up to the corral. The young man's air was as easy and nonchalant as usual. As he passed, Pike looked him full in the face, and though he returned the glance, he neither quailed nor started, nor in any manner showed the slightest confusion.

The cause of this sudden collecting of the cattlemen of the Rio Grande was the report, brought in by a cowboy, that he had seen what he believed to be the trail of some of the cattle-thieves, a few miles up the river.

Jessup was to lead this new expedition, notwithstanding the fact that he was unsuccessful with the last.

"Gentlemen," and Pike stood boldly forth in the midst of the crowd, "if so be you want to find this p'izon critter and them what trails with him, I can lead you straight there."

The statement came as a surprise to every one; and the men crowding closely about him, he was asked to explain himself more fully.

This he did—telling how he had followed the bandits to—and from Carmencita, and how he had located their dug-outs in the hills. But he said not a word about the coming of Giles Jessup to El Espada's room, and of what he had there seen and heard.

While detailing his adventures—which he did

in his dry, half-humorous way—he kept his eyes fixed on Jessup's face. But if he thought the latter would be startled into any betrayal of his guilt, he was mistaken. Neither a glance of the eye nor movement of the features served to show any evidences of guilty knowledge.

"He's a cool 'un!" Pike muttered under his breath, as preparations went forward for the start. "That scoundrel wouldn't be bad on the boards of a theayter."

The old man was permitted to act as guide of the expedition; and, when the river had been crossed, he led the company by as direct a route as possible toward the hidden retreat of the outlaws.

When they reached there, however, they found only an empty nest. The dug-outs were deserted, and the birds had flown.

Pike was completely bewildered by this unexpected turn of events. How had the outlaws gained knowledge of their coming? Who had borne to them the news?

He looked at Jessup. "I might 'a' known it!" was his thought. "I hain't got any more sense than a gopher. Of course he told Skinner last night! That was what he come fer!"

It was all so plain to him, now, that with great bitterness he charged himself with being a fool in not thinking of it before. Yet, he could not reveal his thoughts to any one there, though it was a sore trial to remain silent at that moment.

The trail of the retreating outlaws led toward the south; and though it was followed for a long distance, nothing resulted therefrom. The trail became obliterated, and the country so impassable, that further efforts were deemed useless.

"It's as Jessup know'd it would be all the time!" bitterly, as the expedition turned again toward the river. "Nothin' can never be done so long as that feller is allowed to run things!"

CHAPTER XI.

SALMON PIKE UNBURDENS HIS MIND.

"JOE DOBSON was a man o' parts," and Salmon Pike looked Sylvester Durban steadily in the face as he made the remark. "Yes; he was a man o' parts, but not so much as a good many fellers 'round hyer."

Three or four days had elapsed since the occurrence of the events just related; and throughout the whole of that time Salmon Pike had remained in a state bordering on distraction. The discovery made concerning Giles Jessup had scarcely been out of his thoughts during a waking moment. And it was strongly in his mind, now, as he addressed the above words to the ranchman.

Durban returned his look with interest, not knowing what to make of the old man's words.

"I see you don't ketch my idee," nodding his head gravely. "It don't pay to sling figures of speech. I was thinking of these theayter fellers. They git up in the pulpit, or whatever you call the place where they go through their performances; an' one time they're the king o' England, and at another the queen of the Chinese! I'm much afraid this hyer Rio Grande is one of them kind o' pulpits!"

Sylvester Durban stared his bewilderment.

"Ob, I'm not crazy! Not a bit of it. I'm jist a-philosophizin', as you may say. Jist a-speculatin'. A-drawin' a horoscope, as it were."

"I don't know that I exactly understand you," Durban confessed.

No man was less given to suspicion than Sylvester Durban. He was open-hearted as the day. Strictly honest himself, it pleased him to think all other men the same. Thus it was a difficult thing for him to comprehend the drift of Pike's strangely-worded phrases.

"I see I'll have to make it a little plainer," and the old man screwed his face awry. "They's been a good many things goin' on 'roun' hyer lately that hain't pleased me over well. Now, this El Espada business, f'rinstance! Hain't you never thought there was somethin' cur'us about that?"

"I don't know that I have. The only strange thing, to my mind, is that we can never catch the rascals. They always get warning in some way; and are gone just as we think we are going to put our hands on them."

Salmon Pike bobbed his head until it seemed he was in danger of dislocating his neck.

"That's jist it, pardner! That's jist it!" with great earnestness. "That's the very identical p'int I was a-tryin' to make! You've hit the bull's-eye, pardner; you have so!"

The fact that Durban seemed in a manner to catch the spirit of his distrust, greatly relieved him.

"There's more than one man in this country, Mr. Durban, that's playin' the theayter business, an' a-usin' the Rio Grande country for a stage. I thought maybe you had kind o' sort o' dropped to the same thing. I'm sorry if you hain't."

"I don't want to mention any names—that is, not in a straight, p'ticklarizin' way. I hain't found Joe Dobson; but he's got two or three brothers down hyer that I've already run acrost—though their names hain't Dobson."

"One o' them is a-castin' sheep's-eyes at your gal; an' his name is Coates Foster!"

A pained look came into the ranchman's face—a look which warned Salmon Pike that he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Mr. Foster is an especial friend of mine," a touch of harshness in the voice. "I hope you'll not speak ill of him!"

The old man felt hurt and grieved at the tone in which this was spoken. He had been so full of thoughts of those men, whom he believed to be treacherous, that he felt he must speak to some one on the subject. He had selected Durban as that one; and this rebuff cut him to the quick. It was plain that Durban would hear nothing derogatory of Coates Foster.

"I don't think he's jist the man you take him to be, Mr. Durban; if he is to become your son-in-law."

"So far as I know, he is not to become my son-in-law!" spoken rather coldly.

He arose as if to go; but Pike detained him by a wave of the hand.

"Tain't no use, I see!" apologetically. "I begs your pardon fer what I've said. It may be that I'm away off in all my guesses. An old man like me gits to meanderin' an' moonin' sometimes, and gits strange crotchets in his head. Likely this is one of them. Anyway, I withdraw my remarks. Fergit 'em if you can, Mr. Durban!"

No more was said on the subject that day; but on the following, Salmon Pike again approached Durban, unable to longer resist his desires—and warned him against too great an intimacy with Giles Jessup.

"I promised I wouldn't say nuthin' more ag'in' Coates Foster," he averred, "an' I hain't a-goin' to! This is a gray hoss of another color, an' which his name is Giles Jessup. I don't reely think, Mr. Durban, that this hyer Jessup, that I see a-hangin' aroun' hyer all the time, is the clear, white article."

"Well, I think he is!" with abrupt curttness. "If I hadn't, I shouldn't have employed him."

"Employed him?"

"That's what I said Mr. Pike! I employed him yesterday as foreman of my ranch; and, hereafter, his duties will require him to remain here the greater part of the time."

This news came with such astounding suddenness that the old man found himself unable to formulate a ready reply. His motives had been of the kindest; but he saw they were likely to be impugned. Mr. Durban could not, or would not understand him, nor would he listen to any explanation or word of suspicion against these men. In his eyes, they were honorable men and gentlemen! They were friends of his, too; and their good names were, therefore, as dear to him as his own.

Salmon Pike went away crushed and hurt. He had made a woeful mistake in approaching Sylvester Durban on this delicate subject. The result of his misdirected efforts was that he had incurred Durban's ill will; had been wholly misunderstood; and had injured what little influence he may have possessed.

This knowledge weighed heavily on him and to a great extent hampered him in his work.

CHAPTER XII.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

A WEEK went by without any occurrence of an exciting character. In spite of the disfavor with which he knew he was regarded by Durban, Pike persisted in remaining at the ranch. He felt that for the present his work lay there, and he did not intend to leave so long as he could accomplish anything by remaining.

Throughout that time he watched Jessup with a constant and jealous eye. He had not been pleased to see this "scoundrel," as he mentally termed Jessup, elevated to the foremanship; but that was a thing with which he had nothing to do, and he felt he really had no right to complain about it.

There was another circumstance that hurt him more than did this. It required no special powers of observation to see that this new foreman was rising rapidly in the estimation of Jessie Durban.

"He'll be a-marryin' her next!" he grumbled. "See if he don't. It's a shame the way things are goin' on 'round hyer. Villains is a-flyin' high, an' honest men has to keep their mouths shet. But it's the way of the world! They's one consolation, though: There never was a scoundrel yit that didn't finally git his jest deserts. An' it will be so in this case. If it don't, I'll go out of the prophet business!"

It did seem that Salmon Pike was correct in his ideas concerning the young people. Giles Jessup and Jessie Durban were together a great deal in those days. The evenings were long and pleasant; and, as both were given to walking, there were moonlight saunterings innumerable.

Jessup had been placed at the head of the new organization with which it was purposed to operate against El Espada. Nothing had been done, however, since the last unsuccessful attempt; and now the rumor drifted to Pike that nothing more was to be done. He hastened to verify this, and found the information correct.

Jessup had announced a belief that these open efforts were wholly useless, for the reason that the outlaws always got knowledge of every movement in time to baffle it. It was a mere

waste of energy to continue them, he asserted; and so for the present they were dropped.

This was but another link in the chain of evidence which Pike believed he was forging against this man.

"The cattle-thieves'll jist flourish like a whole forest o' green bay-trees!" he growled. "There never can be anything done against them so long as Giles Jessup has got the swing o' things!"

Jessup was out on the range almost every day; and, on the pretense of hunting, Salmon Pike invariably followed him.

On one such occasion, he witnessed a deed that, while it did not lessen his suspicions, aroused in his breast a feeling of sympathy for the young foreman.

Jessup had entered a thick cover of mesquite, and into this cover, the old man saw Coates Foster and three cowboys follow.

He knew there was no love lost between Jessup and Foster, and instantly concluded there was peril in store for the foreman. Jessup's attentions to Jessie Durban had filled Foster with maddest jealousy. Pike thought of this, as he hastened into his mesquite after the men.

Foster and the cowboys were creeping stealthily along, taking advantage of the screening bushes, and Pike imitated their movements. It was by means of the mesquite groves scattered here and there that he had been able to keep so near to Jessup that day without detection.

He lost sight of the four men soon after they entered the bushes, but he found the imprints of their feet in the sandy soil, and was able to follow them by means of these. Jessup had left his horse picketed out on the grass at the opposite side of the grove, and toward it he was making his way.

The old man crept along with cat-like silence, and was soon rewarded by a sight that caused his blood to tingle.

Coates Foster and the three cowboys had overtaken Jessup, had leaped upon and bound him, and now had him tied to one of the gnarled and scrubby trees.

His face was turned to the tree and his arms were bound to it in front of him; while, at the moment they became visible to Pike, one of the cowboys was menacingly swinging a stock-whip.

"The scamps!" the old man blurted, scarcely able to control his indignation. "They're a-goin' to lick him, er I'm a hoss-thief!"

It was soon shown that he was not wrong in his surmise. The lash of the stock-whip whistled through the air and came down on Jessup's almost bare shoulders with stinging force.

Pike was in position to look the foreman full in the face, although invisible himself. Jessup was very pale, and though he trembled slightly as the cutting lash stung the tender flesh, he did not once lose his air of firmness and defiance.

The foreman was a man of courage; and while he was no doubt humiliated by the treatment he was receiving, there was nothing in his manner to indicate fear.

As the blow fell, the old man writhed in sympathy.

Again the heavy stock-whip descended, and then again and again.

Jessup said not a word by way of reproach or appeal. He bore the blows with the stoicism of a savage.

"Now, will you leave the country?" Pike heard Foster demand of him. "We will give you twenty-four hours to clear out of here, and will let you go now, if you say you will do it."

Not a sound came from the lips of the bound man. He stared straight before him with eyes which seemed to see nothing, but within which was concentrated such a look of suppressed fury as Pike had never beheld.

"If they do let him loose, he'll kill every mother's son of them!" was the way he interpreted the look.

As Jessup would make no reply, Foster motioned to the cowboy who was wielding the whip—and a Mexican of the lowest and most brutal type was this cowboy—and again the singing lash descended.

"Will you leave?" Foster almost shrieked. The foreman remained stubbornly silent.

"If you don't speak, I'll murder you right here!"

For the first time Jessup's lips parted. "You'd better do that!" the words stinging and bitter. "So help me God! if I'm permitted to go from here alive, I'll be even with every one of you devils for this outrage!"

"Lay on the lash, Manuel!"

And Foster almost screamed the command, dancing about in a very fury.

The Mexican obeyed with a will, and for a few moments nothing could be heard but the keen reports of the snapping lash as it curled and writhed snake-like across the foreman's shoulders.

"Perhaps you don't know what I'm whipping you for?" as the Mexican desisted.

"Because you're a cowardly dog!" was the irritating answer.

A fierce scowl swept over the ranchman's face.

"It's because you are one of El Espada's men, chiefly! We're getting tired of having a two-faced scoundrel like you set himself up as somebody!"

"I shouldn't think *you* would be in a position to make any charge!" as defiantly as if he were not in the power of this man.

"And, more than that," Foster went on, "you've been trying to work yourself into the good graces of my affianced wife Jessie Durban. A nice man *you* are, to thus take advantage of your position as foreman.

"Will you not speak?" as Jessup resolutely kept his lips sealed. "I should think you'd know that sullenness don't pay here! Now, will you leave the country, if I'll release you?"

Jessup would not speak; nor could a further use of the stock-whip force from him a word.

Foster had sense enough, in spite of his mad rage, to see that further beating of this man must result in frightful injuries, and might even have a fatal termination. Therefore, after some fierce threats, and finding he could not extort a promise from him, he ordered the cowboys to cast loose the ropes.

The foreman was so exhausted and weakened by the pain that he reeled and almost fell to the ground when freed. But the defiant light in his eyes shone as strongly as ever. His spirit had not been conquered; and though Foster had punished him severely for his alleged wrongdoing, the act had gained for the ranchman the undying enmity of this strong, stern man.

"This is not the last of this!" and Jessup hurled the words at Foster with a viciousness that was terrible, and he stumbled blindly away through the mesquite. "I will even the score with every one of you, if it takes me a lifetime to do it!"

Salmon Pike's nerves were tingling, as he listened to these words; for Foster's dastardly conduct had turned the old man's sympathies to Jessup.

"I'm not a man o' blood," he whispered slowly, as he stared hard at Foster and his cowardly companions. "But I do hope that he'll be able some day to lick ever' one o' you, just as you have him! He hain't square, Giles Jessup hain't, as I'm a-knowin' full well; but that hain't no reason why he should be cut to pieces in a style like that!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A QUEER COMPACT.

COATES FOSTER and his cowboys quickly hurried away from the spot that had witnessed their dastard act. They went sneakingly, and with a look of guilt upon their faces. Foster already began to feel that in thus wantonly and brutally attacking Durban's new foreman he had committed a serious error, and one that in all probability would cost him dearly.

Yet he was still so venomous toward this man, he would not confess even to himself that he had done wrong.

"What right had he to abandon his own ranch and seek this place?" he queried, as he slipped among the mesquite trees in the direction of his horse. "He did it that he might have a better chance to win Jessie Durban!"

This may have been the reason which induced Giles Jessup to dispose of his small ranch on the Rio Grande and seek employment at Durban's. Whether it was or not, Coates Foster was firmly convinced of it; and this had been one of the impelling causes of his recent act.

As soon as Foster and the cowboys had disappeared in the mesquite, Salmon Pike arose from his hiding-place and hastened after Giles Jessup. He did not overtake Jessup, however. The latter had hurried to his horse, and, when Pike gained the edge of the grove, the foreman was some distance away, galloping toward the ranch-house.

The old man had concealed Samson in a similar grove not far off, and, within a very few minutes thereafter, he was mounted on the burro and picking his course in the same direction.

He reached the ranch buildings about a half-hour after Jessup's arrival, and at once sought an interview with him.

In spite of his hurts, Jessup had not revealed to any one a hint of the occurrences of the past hour. He had resolved to maintain silence on that subject. This would require a heroic effort, especially at that time. The cruel lash of the stock-whip had cut deep, and he knew that his back was striped from the effect of the heavy strokes, and that in more than one place the skin had been laid open. And painful as these were, they did not sting and madden him half as much as did the humiliating thoughts therewith connected.

It was more difficult to hide the evidences of these thoughts, and of the deep feeling of revenge that seemed to burn to his very soul, than it was to conceal the physical injuries he had suffered. When he returned to the ranch, he knew that his face was ghastly pale. His hands trembled, too; and the looking-glass, suspended near his cot in the bunk-house, revealed to him the unnatural light which shone out of his eyes.

He was still in the bunk-room, when the approach of Salmon Pike aroused him.

"Pardner," and there was extreme kindness in the old man's tones, "if so be you've no objections, I'd like a word or two with you."

Pike could not fail to note the hot light that

gleamed from Jessup's dark eyes, as the latter returned his gaze.

He saw that here was a man who was not of the kind to tamely submit to such indignities as had been that afternoon heaped on him.

Pike could not help marveling at the coolness and calmness Jessup displayed. He could see that the foreman's mind was working like a suppressed volcano; and that, like that natural engine of destruction, it was liable at any minute to break bounds with appalling effect.

Jessup did not reply to the old man's request.

"I was out yander," jerking a thumb in the direction from whence he had come; "and, pardner, it hurt me powerful—most as much, I think, as it did you—when them skunks laid on the stock-whip!"

The dull light in Jessup's eyes, which had seemed to glow like a half-smoldering coal of fire, flamed now into sudden fierceness.

He took a quick step toward Pike; then abruptly halted, and clutched at his throat as if for breath.

"What is it you say? Out yonder? My God, did you see that?"

"Take it cool, pardner!" striving to calm the sudden tempest he had evoked. "It was as mean a thing as I ever see; an' I 'low I've seen a good many low-down tricks. But, it wasn't fer that I come. 'Twas about somethin' else!"

Jessup seized him by the arm and drew him to a seat on the cot.

"Tell me about it," he hoarsely commanded.

"All you saw. Everything! Everything!"

Pike complied to the best of his ability, Jessup listening like a leashed tiger.

"I'm not an assassin, or a murderer!" when Pike had finished his narrative. "But I propose to even things with Coates Foster. I'm not afraid of Foster, and I'm going to stay here in spite of all his threats.

"You are here for a purpose, Salmon Pike, and I think I know what that purpose is. My plans may be in line with yours, or they may not be. As to that I shall not say. Perhaps I can help you, though, if you will help me."

Pike's mind instantly reverted to the dug-out in the mountains, where he had seen Giles Jessup in conference with El Espada. He wondered if the plans spoken of had any reference to or connection with the cattle-thieves. As these thoughts swam through his brain, they tended to dissipate the kindly feeling engendered by Coates Foster's attack.

He asked himself if it would be safe to make mention of El Espada.

"Foster charged you with bein' in with the outlaws!" suggestively.

"I know he did; and any one who wants to believe it, is at liberty to do so. Foster has lied on me continually, and I don't care to take time to defend my character from his aspersions."

This seemed to Pike an evasion, and he bluntly hinted as much.

"I think we can help one another," the old man continued, after making this thrust. "You've got it in for Foster, as a blind man can plainly see. I hain't a-lovin' that feller any too well myself. I'm in with you in helping to tangle him up, and land him where he ought to be!"

Jessup bent on him a curious look.

"If you want any assistance in that line, all right! I'm going to see that justice is done to that fellow. You can help me, or you can go your own road.

"But, mind you, I'm making no promises, nor any defense. I'm not in a mood to. Maybe some other time I'll endeavor to explain matters. But, not now! I can't think of anything except what happened this afternoon. My stinging back won't let me forget it, if I wanted to; and you may be sure I don't want to."

"Well," and Pike rubbed his long nose reflectively, his thoughts on El Espada and the relation of this man to the bandit, "if so be you're willin', we'll trot in double harness along the trail you've been mappin' out, so long as it suits me!"

"And me!" Jessup returned.

"I s'pose that's right, as this hain't no jughanded affair. As long as it suits both o' us, we'll work together in puttin' Coates Foster behind prison bars—where he ought to be!"

It was a queer compact; but the men seemed to be in earnest; and each hoped that good might come out of the arrangement.

"I don't like to jine hands with one of the cattle-thieves, that way," the old man somewhat disconsolately muttered, as he left the building. "I've allus believed that good couldn't come out of evil, any more'n you can grow apples on a mesquite tree. But we'll see! We'll see!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TORCH OF THE INCENDIARY.

Two nights later, the western heavens seemed to burst into sudden flame.

Salmon Pike, who had been spending a restless night in the bunk-room at Durban's, saw the fire, as it leaped into being on the far-off prairie. He had been unable to sleep, and was strolling leisurely about, at the time.

His shout aroused the cowboys, as well as Durban and his family.

"It isn't a prairie fire!" and Durban strained his eyes in an effort to make out the character of this strange light.

"Oh, father!" and Jssie Durban clasped her hands. "I'm sure that fire is at Mr. Foster's."

Some of the cowboys echoed this belief.

A sudden fear came upon the old man. He thought of Giles Jessup. The foreman was away. Could it be possible that through a spirit of revenge he had set fire to Foster's buildings?

A number of ponies were quickly got out, and Durban and his men mounted for the purpose of riding to the fire. Pike requested that he be given a pony and be permitted to accompany them.

They rode with the reckless speed characteristic of the horsemen of the range; and half the distance to Foster's was covered in a comparatively short time. But even in that short time, the furious flames had in a large measure wasted their energies and the glow on the sky-line had greatly lessened. Either the fire had been extinguished, a thing that appeared impossible, or the building been consumed.

Near the half-way point, they encountered a similar body of horsemen, riding as furiously in the opposite direction. They were Coates Foster and his cowboys.

"Have you seen anything of Jessup?" was the startling question propounded by Foster—startling at least to Pike.

The horses of both parties were blowing and panting, showing how hard they had been ridden.

"Why had Foster and his men left the fire to do its ravages?" was a query that struggled for a reply in Pike's mind. He had noticed, too, that before putting the question, Coates Foster had taken time to look over Durban's force and see that Jessup was not there.

"The scoundrel set fire to my house, and it's burned down!" Foster now declared, as soon as he was assured that Durban's foreman was absent. "Gentlemen, it's as villainous a case of incendiarism as was ever consummated! Two thousand dollars gone up in smoke, in less than an hour! And all because of the feeling of enmity he bears me!"

The speech brought exceeding pain to the honest heart of Sylvester Durban.

"You are sure?"

"I'm sure!" Foster hastily ejaculated. "As sure as any one can be of a thing he didn't see with his own eyes. If Jessup isn't guilty, why is he not with you at this moment? Where is he? Does any one know? One of my men saw him not far from my house, just before dark."

In making these charges, Coates Foster was acting in good faith. He really believed that Giles Jessup had fired the building; and that it had been done as a piece of revenge for the whipping given him. Of course, he had said nothing to Durban of this.

"I want to see you!" riding aside and motioning to Durban.

Then, when the latter came up:

"I don't know that I ought to make mention of it, for it's a delicate thing; but I know what I'm doing in thus charging Jessup with firing my house; and he did it because he is jealous of the attentions I have been paying Miss Jessie. I don't suppose you have noticed it, Mr. Durban, but he has had his eye fixed on your daughter ever since he has been at your place, and even before he went there."

Coates Foster, some two weeks before, had spoken to Mr. Durban of Jessie, and requested that gentleman's permission to pay court to his daughter; and the request had been favorably received, for Durban had a good opinion of this young ranchman. This it was that emboldened him to speak so plainly on this occasion to the father of the girl to whose hand he aspired.

"And, there's another thing," growing bolder as he talked. "I had some harsh words with the puppy a couple of days ago, and gave him a whipping for some epithets he applied to me. That's added proof, to my mind; and I should have known him to be the guilty party by that, if for no other reason."

Durban could not believe, even then, that Jessup had committed so base an act, though in the entire innocence of his heart he never questioned a word of Foster's story. It was only with the latter's surmises that he could not agree.

Having already openly charged Jessup with firing the building, Coates Foster rode back to the excited cowboys and there repeated the assertion he had first made.

Naturally Foster's own cowboys adhered to the belief of their employer; and many of Durban's men were similarly inclined. This was especially the case with one who felt that he had been displaced in the elevation of Jessup to the foremanship.

Durban joined the group, and a very animated and heated discussion followed, the ranchman arguing for a charitable opinion until the real facts should be known.

As none knew where to hunt for Jessup, the entire party proceeded to Foster's ranch to take a look at the still burning ruins.

A great heap of coals and smoldering timber was what they saw. Only the ranch-house had

been fired. The bunk-room and stables were still standing, having been so far away they had not caught from the principal buildings.

Foster's servants and two or three of his cowboys were there, looking on in a helpless sort of a way. Very little had been done to try to save the house, for when the fire was discovered it had gained such headway that all efforts were clearly futile.

Foster's rage broke out afresh as he gazed at the ruins of his home, and he raged at Jessup in the most bitter and vindictive way.

One of the cowboys who had remained behind, now came forward and volunteered the information that he believed he had found the tracks of the incendiary's horse leading toward the river.

No one appeared to question the theory that the fire was the work of an incendiary. This matter had been fully discussed by Foster and his men before they rode away in the direction of Durban's. That discussion had shown them that the fire could not have had a natural origin. The proof to the contrary was too clear. Some inflammable material was found in the grass near by, thoroughly saturated with oil.

A clamorous demand that the trail of the incendiary be picked up and followed, now arose; and as Durban, who was in a wavering state of mind, offered no protest, the entire party followed the cowboy to the point where he had seen the suspicious footprints.

These seemed to come directly from the ranch-house; and an inquiry showed that none of Foster's men had ridden a horse near that point during the day. The soil near the river was soft, and but a glance served to show that the trail was a fresh one.

The excitement grew to fever heat, as the men crowded forward in pursuit of this horse-man. A half-dozen of them were on foot, bearing lanterns, and the flashing lights made the scene a picturesque one.

The horse had entered the river at a point almost due south of Foster's, and when the river had been crossed, and search made on the other bank, the trail was found there.

It led toward the hills, but when a mile had been passed over the character of the ground caused the hoof-marks to vanish, and the party was at a standstill.

Nevertheless, after some discussion, they continued on in the direction the horseman seemed to have been taking, hoping that by some lucky chance they might come on him in the fastnesses of the hills.

As they advanced, they heard hoof-strokes. These appeared to be coming toward them; and they hastily secreted themselves and their animals until they could ascertain who the unknown rider might be.

The hoof-beats quickly became more distinct; and then the horseman loomed up in the semi-gloom. The lanterns had been extinguished, and there was nothing to reveal to him any human presence in that region.

He came on at an easy gait; and as he drew nearer, the information was excitedly passed around that he was none other than Giles Jessup.

As he reached a point near the concealing mesquite, he was harshly commanded to halt; the command being backed up by a number of rifles that were now, for the first time, visible.

Jessup gave a violent start, and attempted to wheel his horse and dash away. But he had already entered the net which had been prepared for him, and a number of Coates Foster's men threw themselves across the line of his intended flight, and thus balked his purpose.

Coates Foster and Durban immediately advanced toward him; and when he saw who they were, he quieted his restive broncho, and called out cheerily:

"Oh, it's you, is it? I thought I had tumbled into a nest of cattle-thieves. I see *you* have made as bad a mistake, for I guess you thought I was El Espada, himself, by the way you sung out a while ago!"

"Get down off that horse!" and Coates Foster threw his rifle to a threatening position. "We're not in a joking mood, just now!"

At this juncture the cowboys swarmed from the mesquite; and Salmon Pike, who was with them, fancied he detected a wavering in Jessup's manner. The darkness, however, prevented him from being sure of this.

"What's up?" looking about in a puzzled and helpless way.

"I shouldn't think you'd need to ask!" was Foster's sneering reply. "We want *you*; and we want you *bad*!"

Again Jessup glanced bewilderedly over the crowd.

"I don't understand!" he protested. "What am I wanted for?"

Salmon Pike was eagerly drinking in every word, endeavoring to determine from the intonations of Jessup's voice whether or not he was guilty. But he was obliged to confess himself completely at fault. Jessup was agitated, and very much so. Was that proof that he knew their mission? Perhaps his hatred of Foster produced a tremulousness of tone and uncertainty of manner!

"I must know what I am charged with!" with a burst of fiery determination. "You surround

me here with guns, as if I was a murderer; yet, you don't tell me what crime I have committed! I appeal to you, gentlemen, is that the fair thing?"

At this Durban spoke up, and in a voice that was extremely kind, but which held a thrill of pain, told Jessup what he was charged with.

"It's a lie!" the foreman thundered. "As black a lie as ever came out of a human throat! I haven't been near Coates Foster's for a month, and he knows it!"

Foster sprung toward him, as if he meant to drag him from the horse, but was restrained by Durban.

"I have been out in the hills on a matter entirely private to myself, and seeing that fire some time ago, I was riding to find out what it meant. That's the truth, gentlemen!"

"Entirely private to himself? Now, what does that mean?" Salmon Pike mentally queried. "I reckon he's been on another trip to El Espada's!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jessup! But you'll have to go with us!" said Durban, sympathetically. "I'll see that you have a fair trial; and anything else that I can do for you, I'll do gladly!"

"Thank you, Mr. Durban! You're a gentleman; and if there were more like you, in this crowd, I wouldn't be thus accused."

"You have taken me on Mexican soil; and now I demand that I be tried before the alcalde of Carmencita. I wouldn't trust the liberty of a dog with that justice-of-the-peace across the river. He's too good a friend of Coates Foster's!"

Foster appeared unwilling that Jessup should be taken before the alcalde; but the request seemed altogether so fair that his wish was overruled; and thereupon a body of men was selected to conduct the prisoner to the jail at Carmencita.

"He'll know how to get out of that!" Pike muttered, as he watched them ride away in the darkness. "Likely that's why he wanted to be took there."

CHAPTER XV.

BEFORE THE ALCALDE.

CARMENCITA was in a state of excitement on the morning of the trial. The accusation brought against Jessup was in the mouths of all the citizens, and the streets were thronged with people discussing the case from every standpoint. In the minds of these people, Jessup was guilty. Was he not a hated American? And had he not been in the prison once before, and escaped therefrom in a very surreptitious and undignified way? Therefore, of course, he was guilty; and if not guilty, he ought to be punished, anyway, for the offense previously charged against him.

The love of sensation is wide-extended among Mexicans, and a large crowd had come in from the surrounding country to be present at the trial. These were added to, from time to time, by cowboys from the American side of the river.

Contrary to Pike's expectation, Jessup had made no effort to escape from jail, but seemed to be awaiting his trial with the calm confidence of innocence.

Pike reached Carmencita at an early hour, and talked freely with such Americans as were already gathered there, finding the opinions of these very much divided.

Wentworth was still absent at his mine in the mountains, a fact regretted by the old man. He had hoped to get an interview with Wentworth, thinking he might thereby gain some vital information.

The hour fixed was ten o'clock; and shortly before that, Sylvester Durban and his daughter made their appearance. Jessie Durban was very pale and anxious, and seemed much depressed at what had occurred. Her father had informed her of the charges made to him privately by Foster against Jessup. It was not a pleasant thing to have these men warring over her.

A warm regard for Jessup had been growing up in her heart with the result that her feelings for Foster had sensibly cooled; consequently the affair of the night had not only greatly shocked her, but had kindled her sympathies for the new foreman. She did not believe Jessup guilty, and had so expressed herself to her father. She was indignant, too, over the whipping which Foster had said he had administered.

Foster came into town at almost the same moment, and rode directly to where Durban and his daughter were still seated on their horses. Jessie averted her gaze, and responded coldly to Foster's greeting; a thing that cut the young ranchman to the quick.

He could not draw her into conversation; and, provoked by the frigidity of her manner, he soon after rode away.

It was a great and proud day for Pedro Francisco, the alcalde. He delighted in nothing so much as in an opportunity to display his wisdom and pose as a man of consequence. He felt he would be the centre of attraction on that day, and he swelled with the foolish pride of a strutting turkey-cock.

Before the hour set for the trial, he paid a visit to the prisoner. Salmon Pike saw him, as he went toward the jail, and would have given a great deal for the privilege of witnessing the interview between these two.

"I wonder what the mayor will say about him a-jumpin' through the winder that night?" with a low chuckle.

Pike, on entering the town, had felt a little bit shaky, fearing he would be placed under arrest for his part in that affair. It must have been very humiliating to Francisco to have the horse-pistol thrust into his face, and be compelled under threats to deliver up the key to the gate. It was a thing the alcalde was not likely to soon forget. But Pike's interest in the trial had been so great he had determined to come to Carmencita, let the result be what it might.

He had half expected a mob to gather around him as he entered the place, and had been agreeably surprised when nothing of the kind occurred. No reference was made by any one to his recent imprisonment. Neither Rodrigo nor Dominique Gervase were to be seen, though he looked closely for them.

All this was a puzzle to the old man—a puzzle he could not unravel. It was so contrary to all his anticipations!

The court-room of Carmencita was a large, paved square, open to the sky, and surrounded on its four sides by white walls of adobe. There was a little fountain in it, whose singing waters served to temper the heat; and a number of trees cast a grateful shade.

The court was crowded at the opening of the trial—crowded almost to the point of suffocation; while the flat roofs of all the houses in the vicinity were also covered with an excited and jostling throng. Francisco sat in state, leaning lazily back in a big, cushioned chair, while over him there stretched a canopy as blue as the sky.

Jessup looked very pale as he was brought in; but not a muscle of his face twitched, as he glanced with his calm clear eyes over the assembly.

No lawyers were employed in this trial, and the rules of the court were of the simplest. Nor did the trial last long.

Coates Foster and his cowboys gave in their testimony in a succinct and straightforward way; after which Jessup was requested to speak in his own behalf.

All he did was to deny *in toto* the accusations brought against him, and to assert his entire innocence.

Then he called on Durban and a number whom he knew to be friendly; and these testified to his general good character.

To Salmon Pike, Jessup's conviction was a foregone conclusion. His surprise was intense, therefore, when the alcalde arose—after the retirement of the last witness—and stated that he found the prisoner "not guilty!"

Francisco waved his hand beckoningly; and into the court there streamed a guard of Mexican police.

The populace vented its indignation in loud and clamorous cries; but unheeding these, the police formed in a compact body about Jessup and conducted him away.

"That do jist knock the persimmon!" and the old man twisted his face into a scowl of displeasure. "If that wa'n't a set-up job, then my name ain't Salmon Pike. Why, it's as clear as mud! That infernal alcalde went over to the jail, and there the whole thing was fixed up by him and Jessup. Likely Jessup thought the ev'dence would be too strong for him, and so he reckoned he'd git out of it in this way. An' blast my eyes, he has!"

Some time before, Pike had half-reached the conclusion that the alcalde knew more about El Espada and his bandits than was generally supposed;—in fact that he was on altogether too intimate terms with them. Did not the result of this trial stand as a proof of this?

He had seen Giles Jessup in El Espada's dug-out. Of that, there could be no doubt; and the words then spoken by Jessup showed conclusively that he was in league with the cattle-thieves.

Now, if Pedro Francisco was also a member of this band, or in sympathy with it, what would be more natural than that he should favor Jessup? And that he *had* favored him, Pike could not doubt!

"I never see anything clearer!" the old man grumbled, as these thoughts came to him. "Francisco is one of 'em, and Jessup is one of 'em, and they've simply hung together in this bit of trouble!"

CHAPTER XVI.

COALS OF FIRE.

"WILL you act as my escort to Wayman's?"

There was on the face of Jessie Durban a smile of womanly sweetness, as she preferred this request. She had spoken to Giles Jessup, who had just come from the bunk-room.

It was the day following the trial at Carmencita.

Jessup had been guarded safely to the Rio Grande by the Mexican police. This was done, they explained, because of Francisco's fear of a mob.

Near the river, Sylvester and Jessie Durban joined them; and with these Jessup continued on to the ranch.

Jessup stated he believed the alcalde committed an error in sending him away under guard. He

had no fear of the populace of Carmencita, nor any enemies gathered there at the trial.

Nevertheless, Durban deemed it wise to post some trusty cowboys on the prairie that night; half suspecting that an attempt would be made, at Foster's instigation, to take the foreman out and lynch him. The cowboys watched faithfully, but, as no one appeared, their vigils were useless.

Jessie Durban had done some serious thinking that night. A variety of dark hints against Giles Jessup had been conveyed to her. But of them all she believed not a word. She was anxious and nervous, but it was for his security, and not because she entertained any doubts concerning his character.

Her thoughts had been more in the nature of fancies—rose-colored, cloud-like, gorgeous fancies. In fact, pretty Jessie Durban was beginning to indulge in the blissful, yet dangerous, dream of love. She had thought she cared for Coates Foster, but her thoughts of Coates Foster had never been as were her thoughts of this man.

"I won't believe a word they say against him!" she told herself, as she mentally rehearsed, for the hundredth time, the exciting events of the day. "Coates Foster is jealous, and that's all there is of it! It's real mean of him, too, to start such stories—for no better a reason than that!"

Her face was aflame with indignation, as she sat thus in the quietness of the room, communing with her own thoughts.

She resolved she would show to Jessup by no uncertain words and acts that she believed firmly in his innocence; and this it was that caused her, the next morning, to prefer the request quoted.

Jessie Durban had no real errand at Wayman's. This was a ranch a few miles down the river, on the American side. There were some girls at Wayman's, and because of this she had selected it as her point of destination. Then, the route lay through a very attractive country, the trail passing among some hills that were sufficiently rugged to be picturesque.

"Will I act as your escort to Wayman's? Certainly, if you wish it."

"I shouldn't have asked you, otherwise! I want to ride over to Wayman's, this forenoon. I don't intend to remain there long, and you needn't lose a great deal of time by accompanying me. There is nothing especially demanding your attention here, is there?"

"I think not; but I will speak to your father, first. Then, as soon as I can get the horses ready, we can start."

To say that Giles Jessup was pleased with this mark of Jessie Durban's favor, puts it very mildly. He had no greater ambition than to be thought well of by her, and to stand high in her esteem. He had feared that the charges against him would fill her with prejudice or distrust. Obviously such had not been the case, or she would not have made that request, or spoken to him as she had done.

Sylvester Durban greeted the foreman quite as kindly; and, in reply to his question, stated there was no work that morning he could not readily look after himself; and that if Jessie desired his company to Wayman's, he granted his consent.

It was a pleasant ride, in the cool of the early morning, though Jessup was oppressed somewhat by the disagreeable thoughts that persisted in crowding in on him.

"I should think you would not have chosen me for this purpose," he ventured.

"Why so?" with a bright and cheery look.

His face was flushing painfully.

"Because of what happened yesterday, and because—because— You know, Jessie, that many black things have been said of me lately! I was thinking of these."

"I took you along for pleasant company, and here you are spoiling it all before we are hardly under way!" with a fascinating frown. "I command you to say nothing more about that. If my memory serves me, you were tried yesterday for the crime charged against you, and was pronounced *not guilty*. Then, why speak of it?"

"It was so strongly on my mind that I couldn't help it," endeavoring to laugh. "So many pleasant remarks have been made about me lately! Some of them I *wouldn't* forget, if I could!"

"Is that the proper spirit, Mr. Jessup?" cutting off the head of a sunflower with her riding-whip. "From your tone, one would judge that you would like to decapitate those men as I did that flower."

"I presume I ought to follow the golden rule in this matter; but I assure you, Miss Jessie, that is a great deal easier to talk about than it is to do."

"I presume you refer to Coates Foster?" with an averted glance. "I oughtn't to say it, I know, and you'll pardon me, I'm sure. But I heard a strange story concerning you and Foster, the other day."

Evidently her womanly curiosity was getting the better of her, for she seemed to be forgetting that only a few moments before she had commanded an abandonment of this subject.

He looked at her in a quick, sharp way, before replying.

"Speak on! There have been so many stories circulated, that I don't know which one you may mean. Foster doesn't like me very well; and if it came from him, I can tell you beforehand that it's very likely to be a lie."

There had come a sudden sternness into his tones, which she did not fail to note.

She kept her face turned from him, and busily employed herself toying with the riding-whip, when she again spoke:

"I know I shouldn't speak of it—but I was told that Foster stated he had given you a thrashing for something you said about me. It wasn't true, was it?"

Jessup's face became almost purple, as he listened to these words, and the pupils of his eyes seemed to contract until they were mere fiery points.

"It is not true, Miss Durban! Not true, as you heard it; though there is a grain of truth in the story. I don't know who told you, and I shall not ask; but now that you have mentioned it, it gives me an opportunity to tell just what did occur."

"Foster and three of his Mexicans came upon me in a mesquite grove some three miles east of the ranch-house; and, before I understood the nature of their intentions, they set on me and tied me to one of the trees. Then, at Foster's command, and because I would not make him various promises, such as leaving the country and the like, he had one of the Mexicans to whip me with the stock-whip! That's the true story."

His breast was heaving, as he recalled these black memories, and feelings of the bitterest and strongest character struggled within him for the mastery.

Jessie glanced at him, and when she beheld the feeling of intense suffering that distorted his face, she sorely regretted the curiosity which had prompted the question.

She noticed that he evaded any direct reference to herself as the cause of Foster's brutal attack.

"I'm sorry I said anything about it!" a kind of pity in her voice, the pity being thoroughly mixed with indignation. "Mr. Foster's act was not the act of a gentleman, nor of a man having any sense of honor! Your account does not increase my good opinion of him!"

Jessup could see that she sympathized with him, and though sympathy—especially womanly sympathy—was not distasteful to him, yet in the present instance it did not convey unmixed pleasure and joy. It was humiliating to confess that he had felt the blows of a stock-whip thus administered.

She led the conversation into other channels, and by both the disagreeable subject was thereafter avoided.

Wayman's was reached in due time, and when she had ended her visit, they started for home.

The return ride was even pleasanter than the one going; for, although the day was now much warmer, nothing was said on either side to mar the enjoyment of the journey.

While passing through the rugged hills a sharp, fear-inspired cry reached them from a rocky point not far away. They drew rein instinctively, and together looked in the direction from whence the cry emanated.

What they saw caused them to start. On the top of a bluff, and near a precipitous wall of rock, they beheld two men struggling against each other, each striving to hurl his antagonist into the gorge below.

The struggling men were Coates Foster and one of the Mexican cowboys; and as soon as Jessup saw them he knew from their actions that they were fighting to the death.

Foster was overbearing and cruel to the men in his employ; and some harsh act of his was doubtless the cause of this trouble.

They were locked in a close embrace, and swayed frightfully from side to side on the precipice's dizzy edge.

A little scream of fear came from the girl's lips; and Jessup, swinging hastily out of the saddle, ran in the direction of the cliff.

He had not taken a dozen steps, however, when he saw Foster shoot through the air. The Mexican had gained a sudden decided advantage; and, exerting all his strength, had picked Foster up bodily and tossed him over the ledge.

A wild scream was drawn from the imperiled ranchman, as he felt himself falling through space.

Jessup stopped with a gasp; and Jessie Durban was so overcome by the terrible sight that with difficulty she retained her seat in the saddle.

The Mexican, believing he had hurled his employer to death, darted swiftly away, and was soon lost to view.

But Coates Foster was not destined to die a cruel death on the rocks at the bottom of the gorge. In his fall he struck against the outer branches of a tree, and succeeded in grasping and retaining a hold on one of these. And here he swayed in mid-air, wholly unable to aid himself.

Jessie Durban urged her horse to Jessup's side. "You'll save him, will you not?" she implored.

"Oh, Mr. Jessup, can nothing be done to help him?"

Her tones were pitying in the extreme, and she was shaking with excessive fright.

"I will do what I can for him," Jessup promised, darting forward toward the foot of the tree.

Foster had caught sight of them, and his appeals for assistance now rung out wildly.

"I'm coming!" Jessup called, encouragingly.

Foster's face was agonizing, and such a horror shone in his eyes as he looked down at the cruel rocks!

How to aid the imperiled man was a question not easy to answer.

"Bring me the lariats!" Jessup shouted; and in obedience to this command Jessie Durban hastily removed these articles from the saddles.

Jessup met her, as she advanced with them; and, taking them from her outstretched hands, ran with all his might to the foot of the cliff from which Foster had been thrown. Up this he clambered breathlessly; and when he arrived at the point where the struggle had taken place, he found himself almost directly over Foster, who was still clinging tenaciously to the branches of the tree.

He quickly knotted the lariats together, thus forming a rope of considerable length. This he lowered; but he drew it back again when he saw that Foster would be able to reach it. Then he hurled the noose directly at Foster, and succeeded in landing it on the tree-bough close to him.

"Take hold of that!" he called out. "I have secured the end here. Can you draw yourself into the branches?"

Foster wailed out that he could not.

"Then you will have to take hold of the rope with one hand, and swing out from the tree. Be very careful, so you won't strike against the rocky walls. You can't fall, if you cling to the rope!"

Foster did as directed, clinging to the rope with as firm a clutch as when he had been grasping the bough. There was a creaking and straining of the lariat, as his weight fell upon it; and as he left the tree, it seemed he would be dashed against the wall in spite of his efforts to save himself from that. He touched the wall with his feet; and then hung dangling at the rope's end.

Jessup had taken a turn of the upper portion of the rope about the stub of a tree near him, thus gaining a purchase which would enable him to lower Foster to the ground without great difficulty.

He now began to pay out the rope, keeping it taut about the tree-stub to prevent it from slipping and getting beyond his control; and succeeded in lowering Foster in safety to the ground.

CHAPTER XVII.

JESSUP MAKES A MOVE.

"I HAVE decided to make a movement!"

The remark was addressed by Giles Jessup to Salmon Pike. The men were seated together in the bunk-room at Durban's ranch, on the evening of the day in which Jessup had rescued Coates Foster from his perilous position in the gorge.

Foster's conduct following his rescue was pusillanimous in the extreme. Before Jessie Durban, he had expressed his gratitude in terms that were seemingly fervent; but no sooner did he have an opportunity to speak to Jessup in private, than he turned on him in a growling way that thoroughly exhibited the baseness of his character.

"I have said I thank you," and there was an expressive sneer on his face, "but one can hardly be expected to really thank a man for getting him out of a difficulty which he caused him to fall into."

"You will have to make your meaning clearer," Jessup had replied, hurt by the accusation.

And, thereupon, Coates Foster had deliberately and foully charged him with instigating the Mexican's attack; and had referred, likewise, in brutal tones, to the recent burning of the ranch-house.

The words stung Jessup to the quick; and but for the near presence of Jessie Durban, he would have stricken the scoundrel to the earth.

Now, as he held converse with Salmon Pike, this memory, with others, came to add bitterness to his thoughts.

"This is the worst country I ever saw for heartless villains!" thinking of Coates Foster, as he gave the sentence utterance.

They were alone in the bunk-room; hence Jessup felt free to speak his mind. Moreover, he had determined to more fully take this old man into his confidence, believing he would thereby gain valuable assistance.

"Like Eelino would be, if 'twas full o' Joe Dobsons!" with a great deal of earnestness. "I hain't never yit found the original Joe, but I've found a good many men that I mon't call his counterparts. I've two or three in my mind's eye right now!"

He looked straight at Giles Jessup; and he was wondering if he was not looking on one at that instant.

Pike could never forget how he had seen Jessup in El Espada's dug-out.

"I have commenced the organization of a force that I can depend on," speaking slowly and very earnestly. "I should like to number you in that force. I have found that a large proportion of the cowboys and some of the ranchmen are utterly unreliable. If they are not in league with the cattle-thieves, they seem to be strangely in sympathy with them; and to take any of them into the organization I am perfecting, would be to thwart its purpose."

"There you go, pardner, b'ilin' right ahead like a steam engine off the track, and never onc't showin' me your map or your time-table! What station air you bound fer?"

"I propose to try to root out the River Rustlers; and the only way to do it is to get together a body of men that can be fully trusted. I have been making a careful study of the situation; and within the past two weeks have quietly sounded every cowboy and ranchman of this section. I'm positive of one or two men from each ranch. I have talked with these men openly, and explained to them my intentions; and each one is willing to aid me to the extent of his ability."

"I mean to collect these men into an organization that can be handled with certainty and rapidity; and when the time is ripe, I shall strike a blow at the band of El Espada that will forever break its power!"

Salmon Pike listened to these words with a show of calmness he by no means felt. A number of questions occurred to him; the principal being, "Can this man, himself, be trusted?"

What sort of a game was Giles Jessup playing? Was he in league with El Espada for the benefit of the ranch interests of the Rio Grande, or was it for the ruin of the bandit chief? Jessup seemed to be in earnest, to judge from his words. If he spoke the truth now, his desire was to crush the cattle-thieves!

The old man's head ached from the conflicting thoughts engendered by this puzzle. He could make nothing out of it, though he sought by every possible theory to account for the contradiction in Jessup's attitude. If the foreman was speaking the truth now, then he was deceiving El Espada.

"During the next week or two I want to visit the various ranches and have another talk with the men I have selected," Jessup asserted. "If you want to aid me against El Espada, I should like for you to convey this letter to William Wentworth, at Carmencita. I should go, myself, if I thought it advisable. But I have too many enemies in Carmencita to make it safe for me to do that."

"But Wentworth is not there! He's a-rusticatin' in the mountains, and diggin' gold out by the sackful."

"He's there!" Jessup contradicted. "At least, I have received word to that effect. This letter will explain to him my plans; and he will know what men to select for me in that town."

"But the alcalde!" Pike questioned. "Won't he be likely to sling me into jail ag'in?"

The suggestion had come to him that this might be a trick to throw him into the power of his enemies.

"The alcalde was friendly the last time we saw him, as you know. Probably he is a little sore at the treatment you once gave him; but he will not hold it against you. Roderigo and Gervase are gone; and they were the cause of the trouble we had at that time. No; you can go with perfect safety!"

The old man asked a number of questions pertaining to the route to be taken, the time of going, and similar matters—all of which Jessup answered in a manner that was perfectly satisfactory. And at the conclusion of the conversation, Pike agreed to undertake the delivery of the letter to Wentworth.

He set out that night, mounted on Samson; and reached Carmencita shortly after sunrise, on the following morning.

He found Wentworth in town, as he had been assured he would, and to that gentleman delivered the letter. Wentworth glanced over it, and then read it aloud that Pike might have the benefit of the contents. It was an elaboration of the plan of which Jessup had spoken somewhat fully; and requested Wentworth to obtain for him as many reliable men in Carmencita and elsewhere as he possibly could.

"There isn't a squarer man on the Rio Grande than Giles Jessup!" Wentworth declared, glancing keenly at the old man.

"Why did he say that?" Pike asked himself, afterward. "Did he think I mout be a-suspectin' of Jessup? It looks that way. That's Wentworth a-backin' up Jessup; and now where's the man to back up Wentworth?"

CHAPTER XVIII. SNARED.

On entering Carmencita, the old man had half-fared he would be set upon by some of the Mexican population, notwithstanding his treatment on the day of the trial, and Jessup's assurances. A number of the Mexicans gathered about him, but apparently more through curiosity than otherwise.

At Wentworth's urgent solicitation, he re-

mained in Carmencita throughout the day, the guest of that gentleman. Wentworth had a pleasant home in Carmencita, and a pleasant family; and Pike found the quarters assigned him very cozy and agreeable.

He gave himself up to much serious thought during his short stay, and puzzled over many things; not the least of which was the changed attitude of the alcalde. It was not in the nature of a Mexican to forget or forgive such an affront as Salmon Pike had put on Francisco. He knew Francisco had not forgot it. Then why did he remain so silent?

Two or three times Pike was on the point of paying the alcalde a visit; but he as often recalled the half-formed determination. Nevertheless, the impulse returned again and again; and shortly after nightfall he picked his way up the shadowy street in the direction of Francisco's residence. He was feeling all the time that it was an unwise thing to do; and yet, if he could see Francisco and have a few words of conversation with him, he fancied the latter might drop some remark that would aid in elucidating the many mysteries that were now tormenting him.

He had intended to leave the town that afternoon, in spite of Wentworth's kindly invitation for him to remain, and this desire to see the alcalde had more than anything else kept him from doing so.

He was soon to be given ample time to regret the changefulness of his purpose.

As he drew near the white wall that inclosed the home of the alcalde, he was suddenly set upon by a half-dozen men. They were all strangers to him, and the attack came with surprising quickness. The place was rather a deserted one, and the shadows of night now hung thickly.

Pike uttered a cry, as the man pounced on him. But the cry brought no assistance; and, though he fought with fierce determination, he was speedily overpowered.

His assailants conducted their movements with much quietness and celerity; and, as soon as he was securely bound, they placed him on a little burro and conducted him beyond the limit of the town.

Then the gag, which had prevented him from making any outcry, was removed by one of the men; while the others produced a number of ponies from a thicket.

"I didn't know I was a critter of so much importance!" Pike drawled, as soon as he had the free use of his tongue. "As a gin'ral rule it takes a gov'nor to skeer up an escort like this!"

"You do me proud, gentlemen, you do reely! Now if you'd jist 'commode me by tellin' me where you're a-takin' me to, I don't know that I could ask any other favors."

"You'll find out soon enough!" was the uncivil reply; and the words showed the speaker to be an American.

The men were not long in getting their ponies in readiness; and when they had done so, they mounted and conducted their prisoner in a westerly direction.

"This hyer bur' is a born brother to Samson!" the old man averred, seeking to draw his captors into conversation.

He was wondering who had instigated his capture, and whether Jessup or Wentworth had not had a hand in the matter.

"Does this hyer beast belong to the alcalde? If it do, give him my compliments the first time you meet him, will you? I believe the critter reely rides easier than Samson, though Samson swings along jist like a hammock on legs!"

The men were in no mood for talking, and only gave gruff replies to his questions.

"If you'd on'y line out the path you're a-goin'!" imploringly. "It's as dark as a cellar full of black cats, and the way you go a-plungin' along makes creepy feelin's wiggle up my back jist like so many cold snakes. Maybe there's a canyon er somethin' o' the kind a-layin' across our track, and the fu'st thing we know we'll go plump clean to Chiny!"

His grumblings remained unheeded, however. Perhaps the men knew that his only object was to get them to make an exhibit of their voices. And so, although he continued in the same strain at intervals, they pushed right on, with such speed that the little burro experienced some difficulty in keeping up with them.

"Drat 'em! I wish't they'd go so fast, and git so wropped up in their idee of lungin' right on, that they'd forgit me an' the bur', and go on and leave us hyer in the dark!"

This was the last thing there was any danger of these men doing. In spite of their seeming carelessness, they were watching Pike closely, and keenly noted every word he said.

It was after midnight when they came to a halt; and Pike was not long in discovering that they had reached one of El Espada's camps. It was not a hiding-place, and there were no dug-outs or cabins. Apparently El Espada and his men were only stopping there for the night.

They had scarcely drawn rein when the chief made his appearance; and, after a few moments conversation with one of the men guarding Pike, ordered the whole party to advance.

He did not speak to the old man at that time, and gave him no heed whatever. But when they had pushed further into the hills, and reached some cabins concealed in the depths of a nar-

row gorge, he ordered Pike to enter one of these cabins.

The old man's hands were still tied, though the cords that bound him to the burro had been cast loose from his feet.

Skinner followed him into the cabin, in which a dim light was burning. The bandit was dressed very much as when Pike had seen him at the dug-out in conversation with Giles Jessup.

"How is our good friend, Jessup?" to Pike's immeasurable astonishment, his first question relating to this man.

"I'd think you might know?" looking Skinner full in the eyes. "If I ain't off, you an' Giles Jessup knows a good deal more about each other than is healthy for the country."

Skinner laughed lightly, and took a step that made the hangings of his saber jingle.

"My dear friend, Giles Jessup is a gentleman and a scholar! I heard you had just come from him, and that is why I asked the question."

"Why did you bring me hyer, captain?—that's what I'd like to know! An old chap like me can't be of any use to you."

"Captain, eh? So you know me! Where did you get your information?"

Pike realized that he had made a slip of the tongue. The reason he knew El Espada so well was because he had seen him in the dug-out and heard him talking with Giles Jessup.

"'Twouldn't take a very wise man to know you anywhere!" with unflinching boldness. "You're the best talked about man in this country. I've heerd you described more'n a hundred times, I reckon; and I'd 'a-rec'nized you with my eyes shet!"

"A pretty little yarn, truly! Pike you're a genius at evasion! But that don't matter now! You've been extremely anxious to see my home; and now you see it. The knowledge won't do you any good, though! I know you are Salmon Pike, and what you are doing here on the Rio Grande. Well, let me tell you you'll never find Joe Dobson. You'll stay here till I get through with you; and when I get through with you, you'll not be in a condition to find any one!"

When Skinner departed, the door of the cabin was stoutly barred; and Salmon Pike, after making a careful examination of the fastenings, found he was a prisoner, so closely held that there was little chance of his getting away.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE LETTER.

Tired as he was, Salmon Pike slept little that night. There were too many things to trouble him. He had reached the point where he knew not whom to trust. Like a certain character of Scripture, he was inclined to think that "all men are liars!"

Neither was there anything restful in his present predicament. It was no light thing to be in the power of El Espada. That gentleman had the reputation of possessing some very disagreeable traits. He was cruel and vindictive; and it was said that men had fallen into his hands in these hills, and had never been seen or heard of again by their friends and acquaintances. Such a fate might be his.

Pike watched the dawn slowly break in the east, and change from a dull gray into the brighter hues that heralded the coming of the sun. The scene was a beautiful one, as the rugged hills about him and above the wall of the gorge were clothed in their morning robes of purple and gold. The gorge in which the cabins were located, ran almost due east and west; and no sooner had the sun risen above the eastern peaks than it poured its light into the depths where the cabins were hidden.

Through the one barred window, the old man could now look about him, and learn more accurately the nature of the place into which he had been borne. There were few better locations in that region for the purposes of the outlaws. Except by the way they had come, it appeared to be inaccessible; and the sides of the gorge, as well as the bottom, were covered by a growth of trees and bushes that made of it a very secure hiding-place.

As Pike turned from the small window, his eyes fell upon an object upon the floor. He picked it up. It was a letter, which had apparently been dropped by the bandit chief as he turned to leave the place.

The old man started, as he saw the superscription. The envelope had been torn open, and he quickly extracted the letter from it. The handwriting seemed to be that of Giles Jessup; and when he glanced over the letter he found that it was signed by Jessup and addressed to Peel Skinner.

Pike's breath came quick and hot as he made this discovery. It was evidently the proof necessary to clinch his belief in Jessup's duplicity.

This is what he read:

"MY DEAR SKINNER:—
"I have sent the old man to Carmencita bearing a letter to Wentworth. When I tell you this, you will know what to do. He is a shrewd and long-headed old scamp, and I think you'd better hold him for a while; and finally dispose of him as events may warrant. He is diligently grinding away, hoping to get at some facts; and left at liberty is likely to do a good deal of mischief."

"Yours,
JESSUP."

"The hound!" and Salmon Pike literally ground his teeth in rage. "He's a-goin' to collect a body o' faithful men and do up the cattle-thieves, is he? He's got one fellow from each ranch what he can depend on, has he? And Wentworth, of Carmencita, will help him! An', together, a plan can be worked that'll rake in El Espada, and jist fairly do him up! Oh, yes; it's a beautiful scheme! An' your humble servant tumbled into the trap, like the blame fool that he is!"

The old man gave way to a fit of spleen, as he concluded these observations. He felt that he had been badly taken in by Giles Jessup; and the ease with which he had been deceived greatly humbled his pride in his abilities. He had believed himself a match in cunning for almost any man.

He heard a footstep at the door, and quickly thrust the letter into the pocket of his coat. He did not want Skinner to know he had gained possession of it. Neither did he want to part with it. It might be invaluable some day in convincing an incredulous world of Giles Jessup's complicity with these men.

The bars were removed, and when the door was opened, one of the outlaws entered. Pike had expected to see Skinner, and was relieved to find the visitor another. He much feared his face, and general agitation, would lead to suspicion; and his discovery be thus revealed.

The man was a stolid-appearing fellow, with no great amount of intellect or discernment; and he scarcely gave Pike a second look as he brought forward a dirty tray holding the prisoner's breakfast.

"That's yer grub! An' I hopes it'll p'izen ye!"

With this complimentary greeting, the man set the tray on the floor, backed through the doorway, and, after having secured the bars, disappeared.

"Jis' so there ain't no p'izen in it!" looking at the tray distrustfully. "These fellers wouldn't be any too good to pepper their meat with arsenic, and sweeten their coffee with strychnine. But I don't reckon they're ready to git rid of me jist yit. If they had been, most likely that feller'd 'kep' his head shet. Lightnin' don't never give warnin' when it's a-goin' to trike!"

Notwithstanding this rather confident assertion, he smelt carefully of the victuals, and tasted mincingly of each dish before venturing to eat anything.

"I guess it's all right!" liberally sampling the bread and meat. El Espada keeps a rattlin' good cook. "Imported frum Paree, I calc'late. 'Twouldn't be strange if that's so, fer he's got Frenchmen among his cut-throat crew, I'll bet a button!"

When Pike had finished eating, and the tray and its contents had been removed, El Espada gave him a call. The bandit chief wore his pleasantest smile that morning; and conversed as if he were a gentleman and an upright man, instead of being an outlaw and a fugitive from justice.

Skinner's purpose seemed to be, notwithstanding his previous pretensions, to worm from Pike the real reason of his coming to the Rio Grande country. But the old man was too wary a fox to be trapped into any statement that might be injurious. He talked!—and no man could carry on a conversation that had less point and purpose to it, or that revealed less, than could Salmon Pike when he made a special effort in that direction. His talk revealed nothing, however; and Peel Skinner went away, knowing little if any more than when he came.

The day passed pleasantly enough for Pike, notwithstanding his imprisonment. He was not annoyed or persecuted by the outlaws; and he was given plenty to eat. He managed to gain some sleep, too, which greatly refreshed him; and with the coming of night he felt almost like a new man.

His mind had been busy with many plans of escape, none of which seemed feasible. The window through which light was admitted to the apartment was entirely too small to admit the passage of his body. He believed he could remove the bars without great difficulty—in fact was sure he could; but to do so would not be of the slightest benefit.

The fastenings of the door were on the outside, and he could not get at them. They consisted of heavy bars let into slots, and were of such strength that he could not hope to force or break them. The cabin itself was built of small logs and poles, and was very strong.

Nevertheless, he was determined to break out, if by any stroke of ingenuity he could accomplish it.

He did not purpose to make any effort in that direction, however, until after midnight; and before the arrival of that hour, events received quite a different turn.

The old man was wide awake, waiting impatiently for the coming of midnight, when he heard the bars slightly move, and knew from the sound that they were being slipped out of place. He scarcely knew what to make out of this, and wondered if some member of the band might not be intending to slay him. He kept quiet, though, resolved to await developments.

When the bars had been removed, a key was

softly turned in the lock and the door was drawn partly open.

He saw that a man stood in the doorway, but the faint starlight did not reveal the face.

"It's me!" the whispered words showing a strong Mexican accent.

Pike knew Dominique Gervase, and at once recognized the voice as his.

Gervase stepped into the cabin, drawing the door to after him as he entered.

"You know me?" Gervase questioned.

"I don't know any good of you!" was Pike's stern reply.

He feared this man, and believed that his coming boded ill.

"I'm here to help you," Gervase informed him, in a low voice. "I have come to release you."

"You're not a-lyin', Dominique?" with a tremor of distrust. "Why should you come to help me? You belong to El Espada, now, er I'm away off in my bearin's. It ain't likely, I reckon, that you'd want to help an enemy o' Peel Skinner's?"

"That's just what I do, Mr. Pike! You misjudge me. But I'm not helping you because I'm your friend, or because I would harm El Espada. I shall help you because I hate Giles Jessup!"

Pike's brain almost reeled, as he caught this startling statement. He knew that Jessup had no deadlier enemy than this same Dominique Gervase.

"I hate Giles Jessup, and I would bring his plans to naught!" Dominique declared, with extreme bitterness. "I hate that man as the road-runner hates the rattlesnake!"

"Giles Jessup has thrown you into the power of El Espada, and had you brought here, and here you are to be held. And because he wishes you kept here, I shall let you go, and not for any love of you."

Gervase was exceedingly plain-spoken, to say the least of it, and his words carried conviction. Pike knew that the Mexican had allied himself with Peel Skinner, and that he would therefore have no natural desire to release him. Only a wish to thwart Jessup could account for the strange statements and actions of Dominique.

The old man took time to think this all out calmly and clearly, before trusting himself further into Gervase's power. After all, it might be some trick aimed at him. But, when he had revolved the matter carefully, he was irresistibly brought to the conclusion that Gervase was not deceiving him.

"Come!" said the latter, growing impatient. "I cannot stand here all night. If you want your liberty, follow me! The risk is too great for me to remain long. Should I be discovered by El Espada, or any of the band, my life would pay for it. Revenge is sweet; but to purchase it that way, would be to purchase in too dear a market. So, if you want to escape, follow me at once!"

Pike got up and approached the door, and peered out into the surrounding gloom. No one seemed awake, and silence reigned everywhere. No lights gleamed from any of the cabins. A better chance to get away would never offer.

"I'll go with you, and risk it!" speaking his thoughts aloud. "A man can't die but once, an' I reckon I hain't good fer a very long life if I stay hyer! Leastways, I don't 'low that any insurance agents would hanker over-much to take out a policy on me."

He followed Gervase out of the cabin; and, when they had gained the outside, the Mexican carefully closed the door and dropped the bars into place.

"If any of them should happen to get up they will not suspect anything, and it will give you a better chance to get away," he whispered.

Then he turned up the gorge, and hastened on through the scrubby trees, closely followed by the old man.

Fully a mile was gone over before he slackened his pace. He then pointed to a path leading to the upland above, and said:

"Now go! You can find your way by the stars, and can be far enough from here by morning. I shall go back and arrange things so that it will seem you broke out yourself. This I shall do for my own security."

"You shall hear from me again! This is my first blow at Giles Jessup; but it is not to be my last!"

CHAPTER XX.

A WOMAN'S WILL.

SALMON PIKE hurried on as rapidly as he could travel, taking his course for Durban's ranch. In spite of his slight frame and apparent age, he was a good walker, and was well on toward the river by dawn.

At about this time, while passing through a sheltered belt of country, he heard the steps of an advancing horse, and hastened into concealment.

There was enough light to enable him to see with considerable clearness. When the horseman came in sight, to his great surprise he saw it was Giles Jessup.

From the direction Jessup was taking, it was plain he had come from the river and was going toward the hills.

"Now, what does that mean?" Pike muttered, from his hiding-place. "That feller seems to do a good deal o' night ridin' in this section o' the country! An' there hain't no good in it, er; as I know. Ten to one he's a-goin' to meet Peel Skinner to see how the new pris'ner is a-comin' on. If he goes fur enough, he'll find that the pris'ner has give El Espada the slip."

Wholly unaware that he was being thus observed, Giles Jessup continued peacefully on his way, and was soon lost to sight.

When he had disappeared, Pike came out of the bushes, and after staring long and thoughtfully in the direction taken by the horseman, turned again toward the river.

By the time he had reached the stream the sun had risen.

There was no bridge anywhere near that point; and, disagreeable as was the task of swimming the muddy current, he waded boldly in, and crossed to the other side.

Durban's ranch buildings were now not far away; and though he disliked to approach them in his wet and bedraggled clothing, he yet pressed on.

Jessie Durban saw him as he came across the open prairie; and, to his surprise, ran hysterically out to meet him. She was in great distress.

"Oh, Mr. Pike, I'm so glad you've come! Father is away, and I don't know what to do. All of the cowboys are gone, but one. They went with father, yesterday evening. And such a dreadful thing has happened! Some of El Espada's men came in the night, and carried Mr. Jessup away! and—I'm afraid they will kill him—if they have not already done so!"

To Salmon Pike this was a most astounding and bewildering statement. He was sure the man he had seen was Giles Jessup; yet, here was Jessie Durban declaring that Jessup had been carried away and made a prisoner by El Espada's men. He felt that she had been deceived in some manner; but, when he looked into her anguished face, he could find no words with which to combat her statement.

"Carried away, was he?" puckering his lips sympathetically. "What makes you think so?"

"Look at that!" and Jessie gave him a note.

It was in an unknown hand and was written to Peel Skinner. It had been mailed at a town in Texas, and had been forwarded to Skinner under an assumed name. The contents bore no reference to Giles Jessup, but were in the nature of a warning against the treachery of certain pretended friends, and information as to the movements of various police officers, who, it appeared, were endeavoring to ferret out and bring El Espada and his allies to justice.

"Jim Tanner found that in the grass near the horse stables!" said Jessie, closely noting the expression of Pike's face. "Tanner slept out there last night, while Jessup occupied his cot in the bunk-room. Tanner heard a rush of horses; and, on running out to see what was the matter, saw a number of horsemen gallop away from the bunk-house. And, when he called for Jessup, he found him gone!"

She had hurried on with her information with breathless speed, walking with Pike toward the ranch-house as she talked.

Viewing the matter from her stand-point, and in the light of all information possessed by her, her conclusions were rational. The letter found by Tanner, the one cowboy who was on the place at that time, seemed sufficient proof of the character of the horsemen whom he had seen. It would naturally be supposed that they were El Espada's men, and led by that individual.

And pike had no facts with which to overthrow this last belief. When he had stolen from the cabins in the gorge with Dominique Gervase, everything had seemed marvelously quiet. For all he knew to the contrary, there may not have been a soul there with the exception of himself and Gervase. Gervase had said or intimated, that the bandits were asleep; but no reliance could be placed in any statement made by him.

Salmon Pike did not believe, however, that Giles Jessup had been borne away by the cattle-thieves. He could not believe it; for had he not seen Jessup, riding alone and free through the hills?

This bit of information he could not impart to the girl at his side. She had such implicit belief in Jessup's manliness and innocence that it would have been both useless and cruel to try to undeceive her. Pike could see that she loved this man; and he was old enough to know that a woman's love will blind her to every imperfection and fault in the object of her affection.

His mind was in a tumult of doubt and uncertainty, as he continued on toward the ranch-house. Manifestly, the girl was inclined to place great reliance in his shrewdness and wisdom, and would insist that he take direction of the search for her lover. Her words had intimated as much. Should he deceive her, and make a pretended hunt for Jessup?

He had not settled this point, when the house was reached, and they met Tanner.

"I have promised Miss Jessie that I'd go with her, and do all I could!" Tanner affirmed. "It seems a risky thing for me and her to plunge into the hills on a wild-goose chase like that; but I promised her I'd do it, an' hanged if I don't keep my word!"

Pike took Tanner to one side and propounded to him a series of questions. The result was a reiteration of the account already given by Jessie. He had seen the men and had found the letter, as narrated by her.

"I don't think it's jes' the thing to do," Tanner observed; "but when she come at me a-cryin' that way, what else was I to do? Of course I promised her; and you'd 'a' promised her, too, if you'd 'a' been in my place. Durban's gone, and all the boys; an' she declar's she can't wait, an' won't wait, till they come back!"

After a few further questions, Pike bluntly told him what he had seen in the hills that morning, just before daybreak.

Tanner obstinately refused to believe a word injurious to Jessup.

There hain't a whiter man in this section!" he stoutly asserted. "I don't think it could 'a' been Jessup! If he'd 'a' meant to go away, he'd 'a' said something to me about it!"

Sylvester Durban and his men were not expected to return for a number of hours, and might not get back that day. Jessie was almost crazed by the inaction; and because of this, Pike agreed to accompany her and Tanner in the proposed search.

"I jist know we can't do nothin'," he growlingly protested, "but if you're bound to make a try of it, I'll go along and do what I can to keep you out of harm. When a woman will she will, you may depend on't! There was never anything truer writ than that!"

Having gained Pike's and Tanner's consent to her desires, Jessie Durban hastened the preparations so rapidly, that in a short time they were ready to set out.

"It's the biggest fool trick I ever heard of!" Pike muttered, as they took up the trail toward the river. "But I've promised to go; an' go I will, if it leads the hull b'ilin' of us into the wu'st kind of a hobble."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRES OF REVOLUTION.

"HALT, there!"

More than twenty-four hours had elapsed since Jessie Durban and her companions set out on their seemingly useless search.

The first day witnessed the accomplishment of nothing of any consequence. They had returned to the ranch, far in the night; and Tanner had spent the hours that remained before morning in collecting some cowboys to aid them.

Sylvester Durban and his men had not returned.

Certain wild rumors had flown across the border to the effect that a revolution had suddenly broken out in the adjoining Mexican province, of which Alvarez was the seat of government, and Carmencita the chief town; and, because of these reports, great excitement prevailed in the little company collecting at Durban's.

The command with which this chapter opens came from the leader of a band of military; and, strange to say, this leader was none other than Dominique Gervase. It was addressed to the little company engaged in the search for Giles Jessup.

The cowboys, accompanied by Jessie, and under the leadership of Tanner and Pike, had penetrated some distance into the hills. Under Pike's guidance, they were now heading toward the cabins in the lonely mountain gorge. If Jessup was really in the hands of El Espada, it seemed probable that he would be found there; and Pike, after much reflection, had told the story of his capture, imprisonment and release.

The military under Gervase had appeared suddenly over the crest of a ridge directly in front of the little party; and thus taken by surprise, the latter had no time or opportunity to retreat or gain a place of concealment.

Gervase's men had ridden furiously toward them; and now threatened them with leveled guns, as Gervase shouted the command.

Salmon Pike volunteered to ride forward and ascertain the reason for this show of force. He strongly suspected that the seeming military were a band of El Espada's men in disguise.

He walked toward them, holding up his hands as a sign of amity.

"We demand your unconditional surrender!" Gervase informed him, in reply to his questions. "Know you not that a revolution is in progress?"

Pike recalled the rumors, to which he had previously paid but little attention. At that time reports of uprisings and threats of rebellion were all too frequent in the various provinces of Mexico.

"We have 't time to discuss the matter at length!" and Gervase frowned at the old man's show of ignorance. "A revolution has broken out here; and the revolutionists are bound to win the day. El Espada and his entire band have joined them, on condition that if the insur-

gents are successful they are to be pardoned for all their past crimes. I have been placed in command of this force, and ordered to apprehend and convey to Alvarez any and all parties I may come across who have not given in their adherence to the revolutionists."

"But we air Americans!" Pike protested. "We hain't got nuthin' to do with your little ructions over hyer, an' we hain't a-keerin' anything about 'em!"

Dominique Gervase, however, could not be moved from his purpose, and he so informed Pike.

"Go back and tell your friends that if they will lay down their arms and go with us quietly, no harm shall come to them. But they must accompany us; and, if they force us into a fight, they will have to stand the consequences."

This unwelcome intelligence Pike bore to those who were so anxiously awaiting the result of the interview. There were many protests and much fuming on the part of the cowboys; but as Dominique's force outnumbered them more than three to one, they could do nothing but surrender.

"I call this a mean trick!" and Pike addressed the remark to Gervase, who had dropped in at his side near the rear of the column.

The cowboys had been deprived of their arms, and were now being escorted to Alvarez.

Dominique showed his white teeth in a wicked way.

"Look at that girl!" and the old man pointed to Jessie, who was riding along some distance ahead of them, in a very despondent mood. "Do you call it the work of men to treat a female critter in that way? You're a-breakin' that girl's heart—that's what you air!"

Such an appeal was lost on Gervase, for the man was devoid of the tender sentiments of sympathy and pity. He had so long given free rein to the wolfish instincts of his nature, that all the finer feelings had been crushed out.

"Women don't die of broken hearts," he sneered. "I've heard of the like, but it was only in the pages of fiction!"

"You're a brute!" Pike boldly blurted. "You hain't reely got as much heart as a sand-lizard!"

The declaration appeared to tickle Dominique Gervase, for he greeted it with a hearty guffaw.

"In striking the young lady, I gain an added blow at Giles Jessup! You remember the last time we met I told you I intended to hit him again. If the young lady had not been with your party, I should not have cared whether I carried you to Alvarez or not. But I'm going to take her there and place her in the military prison."

"You have been hunting for Jessup!" sneeringly. "I can tell you where he is. He has joined the revolutionary forces, and his pretended capture from the ranch was for the sole purpose of enabling him to get a short leave of absence without showing his hand to his friends on the other side of the river."

Pike had already explained to Gervase the object that had brought his party into the hills, but this was the first time Gervase had made any mention of his knowledge of Jessup's movements.

The old man endeavored to catch the rascal's eye, that he might determine, if possible, how much truth there was in this statement. It was a startling one, and, if true, gave to many things quite a different aspect. He had begun to despair of following the tortuous paths pursued by Giles Jessup—believing, as he did, that Jessup was playing a dual role.

Dominique Gervase kept his face slightly averted, however, as if understanding something of Pike's wishes.

"You're a brute!" Pike again averred, careless of any peril such epithets might bring to him. "You served me a good turn, Dominique Gervase, an' I'm obleeged to you fer it; but if you was half a man, you wouldn't never think of doin' what you're a-doin' now!"

Gervase paid no heed to his words, seeming to regard them merely as the vexed mutterings of a foolish old man. He had laid bare to Pike the motives governing his actions; and, contented with the accomplishment of this, rode again to the head of the column.

"Tangled hain't no name fer it!" Pike complained, as he glowered after the retreating form of the Mexican. "I'm so tangled that I don't know whether I'm standin' on my head or on my feet, er a-ridin' hoss-back. If things gits mixed much more, I'm afeard I'll fergit even the story o' Joe Dobson!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A FLAG OF TRUCE.

WHEN Sylvester Durban reached home after his long absence, he found the place deserted. Naturally his astonishment was great; and, having heard of the revolution that had been commenced across the river, his anxiety was not inconsiderable.

Almost the first thing he discovered, however, was a letter tacked to the door. It had been placed there by his daughter, and explained why and where she had gone, giving the names of those who had accompanied her.

This information did not tend to dissipat-

Durban's fears for her safety. Rather it increased them. He knew that the hills were now swarming, not only with bandits who had suddenly assumed the role of insurgent soldiers, but with detached bodies of troops from each of the opposing armies. He scarcely dared allow himself to think what she might suffer if taken by any of these.

He did not long delay, therefore, in getting himself and cowboys in readiness; and that same afternoon they crossed the river.

By inquiry they learned of the general direction taken by the party under Tanner and Pike, and along this route they hastened. They kept a sharp lookout for bodies of troops; and once stumbled so near an insurgent camp that they narrowly avoided capture.

They pressed through the hills, without discovering anything of a satisfactory character; and that night rested not far from the plain that stretched away to Alvarez.

Not knowing when or by whom they might be attacked, they chose their camp with a special reference to the ease by which it might be defended.

They were not disturbed during the night, though they could see the gleaming camp-fires of various bodies of troops scattered on the plain; and once they heard the rattle of guns, indicating that a fight or skirmish was in progress.

Durban passed a restless and most wretched night. He scarcely slept; and for hours at a time paced up and down near the sleeping men, watching with hot and feverish eyes the smoldering fires far away on the plain, and asking himself over and over what had become of his daughter.

He felt that she had done a foolish thing in thus leaving home without consulting him. He was grieved and fear-stricken; though he could not find it in his heart to severely censure her for her rash action.

Shortly after daybreak a party of men came into view from the direction of the river. They were Coates Foster and four of his cowboys.

Durban greeted them warmly, glad to have his little force added to. Foster stated that, owing to various circumstances which he recounted, he had not heard of the trouble which had drawn Durban into the hills until the evening of the preceding day; and that as soon thereafter as was possible he had taken those four cowboys and followed.

"I'm here to aid you in any way I can!" and there was a ring of earnestness in his tones.

Coates Foster did not believe a word of the story of Jessup's capture by the cattle-thieves. Notwithstanding that Jessup had saved his life in the gorge, when he had been hurled over the cliff by the Mexican, his hate seemed to burn against Jessup with more fury than ever.

After the greetings were over, he took Durban to one side, and held with him a long and low-toned conversation.

Durban knew that Foster bore a feeling of ill-will against Jessup because of the alleged incendiaryism of the latter, and ought to have been on his guard against any statements Foster might make.

The openness of Durban's character led him, however, to give too easy credence to Foster's charges.

Foster's object was to poison Durban's mind against his foreman. If he could accomplish that successfully he could strike a blow at his rival that would be felt. Durban could not countenance Jessup's attentions to his daughter, if once convinced that he was a bad man. Foster knew he was losing ground in the girl's esteem, and the knowledge maddened him.

The story he recounted to Durban was too long to be reproduced here. It contained details innumerable; all of which pointed to treachery on the part of Jessup. The chief accusation was that the foreman had absented himself purposely, at that opportune time, after so arranging affairs that it was morally certain Jessie would organize and possibly lead a search for him. He also stated a belief that Pike was leagued with Jessup in the scheme; and that its object was to place Jessie with the family of William Wentworth and to do it in such a way that she would never detect the motive underlying it.

The story was strengthened by much circumstantial evidence tending to show that Jessup's chances of winning her would be greatly improved by such a movement.

Durban was not a man to analyze details carefully; and the apparent candor and enthusiasm with which Foster marshaled his proof almost carried conviction. If he did not wholly convert Durban to his way of thinking, he succeeded in so strongly biasing that gentleman against Jessup that his purpose was largely accomplished.

As the Wentworths were presumed to be at Carmencita, it was proposed to direct their course to that town.

But before they could leave their camp a body of Mexican troops was seen approaching.

These caught sight of Durban's camp among the rocks; and with wild cries charged recklessly in that direction.

Durban and Foster speedily got their followers under cover, though their ponies were still

in a very exposed situation. If the troopers were so disposed they could, by a little maneuvering, cut them off from their ponies, and thus easily put them in their power, for without riding animals a party would be extremely helpless in that country of long distances.

The troopers seemed to take it for granted that the force before them were enemies. Therefore, as they charged up, and saw the cowboys scramble for the shelter of the rocks, they opened on them with a rattling fire.

This was too much like actual warfare to be pleasant. The bullets from the weapons of the Mexicans pattered viciously on the rocks within and about the camp. Some came perilously near; so angering the cowboys that only with great difficulty could Durban and Foster restrain them from returning the fire.

This would have been a very unwise thing, and might have placed them in a precarious predicament. They could not hope to cope successfully with the Mexicans, who greatly outnumbered them.

"Do you know any of the men out there?" Foster asked of the cowboys. "If I knew which side they belonged to, I'd know better what to do. It would be unpleasant, though, to tell them we are friends of the Government, if they should happen to belong to the opposition."

This speech served to show quite clearly the natural duplicity of Foster's character. Whatever side these men were serving, he would claim to be serving the same side; and would make that claim a dozen times a day, if necessary; and change his pretended allegiance as frequently.

Durban nor none of the cowboys knew any of the troopers; hence could not answer Foster's question. They wore the regular uniform of the Government forces; but as several companies were known to have revolted and gone over to the insurgents, this was no indication of their standing.

"I'll risk it anyway!" and Foster, having fastened a white handkerchief to a stick, rose from behind the rocks, and waved this white flag above his head.

The pattering fire instantly ceased, showing that the troopers were willing to confer with them.

"Cover my retreat with your guns," he ordered, as he stepped over the low breastwork formed by the natural heaping up of the rocks, and took his way boldly down the slope.

Durban and the cowboys watched him anxiously, with guns held in readiness for any indications of treachery on the part of the Mexicans.

The latter, however, respected a white flag, and two of the officers advanced to meet Foster.

He was seen to confer with these officers a few moments. Then he threw up his hands joyfully, and called out:

"It's all right boys. They are friends!"

At this Durban and a few others scrambled over the rocks and hurried to where Foster was still standing conversing with the officers.

On reaching them they found that Foster had taken the straightforward course, and had simply declared that he and his friends were Americans and non-combatants, and that they had no wish whatever to take sides in the present revolutionary conflict.

The troopers proved to be Government soldiers, who were in that region looking for the band under El Espada, or any insurgents they might come across.

The commander accompanied Foster and his companions to the American camp to personally verify the truth of the story.

The troopers were not permitted to advance; and after satisfying himself he had not been deceived, the commander returned to them; and they all rode away in a body.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALVAREZ BESIEGED.

JESSIE DURBAN and her friends were conveyed to Alvarez by Dominique Gervase, and there placed in the military prison.

The revolution had started in Alvarez, and that town was now held by the insurgents.

Pike and the cowboys were charged by Dominique with being in sympathy with the Government. In the eyes of the insurgents this was a crime not to be condoned; and Dominique had no trouble, therefore, in accomplishing his purpose concerning them.

As it chanced, Salmon Pike and Jim Tanner were placed in the same cell. Nothing could have pleased these two better than such an arrangement, unless it had been the restoring to them of their liberty.

Pike was much exercised concerning the fate of Jessie Durban. He felt in a large measure blamable for her presence there as a prisoner; and chided himself unmercifully and very causelessly for the part he had taken in the ill-fated attempt to follow Giles Jessup and his supposed captors.

Jessie had been separated from them soon after they had been brought to Alvarez, and they had a very imperfect knowledge of her present whereabouts.

"I tell you we was a set of the biggest, daddied fools in the universe fer ever settin' our

feet across the Rio Grande on sich a chase as that!" addressing his grumbling remarks to Tanner. "Accordin' to my opinion—which, like a good many others, hain't sometimes wuth much—Giles Jessup wa'n't never carried away by El Espada. I've laid so from the fu'st. Why! man alive! I seen that very fellow a-pokin' along through those hills that very identical mornin'. An' there wasn't any cattle-thieves a-herdin' an' a-shoo'in' him on, either."

Tanner had long since ceased to dispute with the old man on this subject. He was not inclined to accuse Pike with falsehood; and was willing to admit that Pike had seen some one whom he took to be Jessup. But that the man he had seen was Jessup, he strenuously denied.

From this unpleasant topic of conversation, they turned to plans of escape. They could agree on the fact that they wanted to get out of there, and any hopeful suggestion by either was eagerly welcomed.

As for Jessie Durban, she had not been incarcerated in the Alvarez jail (now used as a military prison), more than an hour, when she received a caller. In fact, there were two of them—William Wentworth and his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth had been in the town of Alvarez when the insurrection broke out; and they had not since been permitted to leave it to return to their home in Carmencita. With regard to the present trouble, Wentworth was holding himself in a strictly neutral position. He really favored the Government, but he was careful not to let this fact be known among the insurgents of Alvarez. His reasons for favoring the Government were not difficult to find. In some respects, perhaps, the Government was corrupt; but it had not extended its hand, with a pardon in the open palm, to men of the stamp of El Espada, as the rebels had done.

He and his amiable wife were permitted the liberty of the town, though they could not go beyond its limits. All around Alvarez fortifications had been constructed and earthworks hastily thrown up; and the insurrectionists were bending every energy to be ready for the final struggle which they knew must soon come.

They held no ill-will against Wentworth, but they feared if they allowed him to leave the place he might convey tidings to the enemy of their strength and available force, and of what they were doing. Hence they held him there in a state of semi-imprisonment.

He was made aware of the arrival of the prisoners under Dominique Gervase soon after they were brought in; and learning that there was a woman among them, he had, in company with his wife, sought the prison for the purpose of seeing her and ascertaining if they could aid her in any way.

When they did this they did not know who she was, and least of all had they an idea that the unknown was Jessie Durban.

The surprise therefore was great and mutual. "My dear child!" and Mrs. Wentworth took Jessie in her arms and wept over her as if she were her own daughter.

"This is too bad!" Wentworth vigorously asserted, an angry light burning in his usually placid eyes. "It's a shame and a disgrace to men claiming to be civilized."

Jessie looked very thin and worn, and her appearance bore ample evidence that she had wept much and suffered greatly. Her face was pale, and her nerves had been much shaken by the hard experiences through which she had passed.

Mrs. Wentworth comforted her as only a motherly, elderly lady knows how to comfort a storm-tossed and spirit-crushed girl.

She remained in the prison with Jessie, while Wentworth hurried away to see what he could do to ameliorate Jessie's condition.

He went direct to the commander having charge of the insurgent forces in Alvarez, and laid before that individual a statement of the case as he knew it. He told of Jessie's father, and assured the officer that wrong was being done the girl in thus holding her.

Fortunately, the officer had a very high opinion of the standing of William Wentworth. The information brought by the latter acquainted him for the first time with the fact that a woman had been placed in the military prison.

"I understand it was done at the instigation of Dominique Gervase," Wentworth assured him, "and I have good reasons for believing that Gervase hopes to accomplish some personal end by the act. It is reported, you know, that Gervase allied himself with El Espada; and he can therefore have no kindly feeling for the men across the river."

The officer had not a very high opinion of Gervase; for, although a revolutionist, he was a man of honor, and scorned the allies who had been purchased by promises of pardon.

"I will look into the matter at the first opportunity," was his agreement, when he had patiently heard Wentworth through.

"It must be done now!" Wentworth firmly urged. "You cannot know how the poor child is suffering, or you would not wish to delay a single minute. No harm can possibly come by ordering her release from the prison, for she cannot escape from the town. I will take her home with me, and will promise you upon my

honor as a gentleman that she shall remain there until you give her permission to quit the place. Can anything be fairer?"

Thus strongly urged, the officer finally acceded to Wentworth's demands—and in spite of a protest which was entered by Gervase, Jessie Durban was shortly after released, and accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth to their home.

This home could not boast the elegancies and comforts of the Wentworth home in Carmencita; but it was a very pleasant place, nevertheless—so far superior to the cramped and dirty quarters she had occupied in the prison, that Jessie wept for joy when she was ushered into it.

She was troubled concerning the fate of Jessup; and opened her heart to Mrs. Wentworth on that subject.

"It's really too bad, my dear!" said Mrs. Wentworth, consolingly. "These are such troubled times that one does not know what to do, or say. El Espada's men have joined the revolutionists, and I think that fact will lessen Mr. Jessup's danger. They can gain nothing, now, by harming him. To do so, would only be to make bitter enemies for them beyond the border. If the rebels are successful—they are to be pardoned, you know; and will then quit their wicked business, I presume."

"I've no doubt they took Mr. Jessup away because they feared he would injure them; but if they should receive pardon he would be powerless to do that. Affairs might be blacker! So cheer up!"

As the night drew on, the excitement in Alvarez increased to fever heat. It was known that the Government was massing troops for the purpose of compelling the surrender of the town.

The next morning the news was brought to Jessie that Alvarez was in a state of siege.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRIEND OR FOE!

"TAKE that, will you!"

Sylvester Durban, armed with a bayoneted musket, made a vicious thrust at Giles Jessup.

The two were alone.

On the afternoon of the previous day, the force under Durban and Foster had been charged by a body of insurgent cavalry, and scattered abroad like sheep without a shepherd. Some of them had been made prisoners.

Durban, mounted on a swift pony, had fled for his life, pursued for several miles by a small detachment of the cavalry. He had eluded these, and since then had been in semi-hiding in the hills.

Since the scattering of the force he had not seen Foster, nor any of the cowboys.

The next morning he made his way with caution toward the open country. He was in a state of uncertainty. In this region, filled with warlike combatants, his danger was great. Belonging to neither force, he would be in a measure at the mercy of both.

He was almost distracted, too. The uncertainty of his knowledge concerning the fate of his daughter drove him half wild. With the strong force of cowboys, he had hoped to penetrate to Carmencita.

To attempt that now would be a hazardous undertaking. In all likelihood he would be captured as he crossed the plain, and thus rendered utterly powerless to do anything.

He meant to try it, though, if he found the plains country open.

Leaving his pony back in the bush, he began the ascent of a low eminence, from which he hoped to gain a good view of the territory before him.

As he crossed a small glade on his way to the summit, he came suddenly face to face with Giles Jessup.

"Hold!" Jessup cried, slipping nimbly aside to avoid Durban's vicious thrust. "Wny, man, are you mad?"

The bayonet barely missed him, and he grasped it with his hands to prevent a repetition of the pass.

Durban was mad with concentrated rage. He tried to jerk the bayonet away; and, if he could have accomplished it, would undoubtedly have made another effort to drive it through Jessup's heart.

"You scoundrel! You villain!" he shrieked, while his eyes glared and flecks of foam appeared on his lips. "You have ruined me, and I'll have your life for it!"

"Calm down a minute," Jessup implored. "I don't know what you mean! Let's come to some understanding. What have I done to you?"

"What haven't you done?" giving another jerk at the gun. "Giles Jessup, what haven't you done?"

"I assure you I've done nothing to cause this outbreak!"

"My daughter! What have you done with her? Answer me that, quick! What have you done with her? Where is she?"

"If I knew I would tell you!" in a very earnest and emphatic way. "I have been trying to find her myself!"

"See here, Durban! For some reason you are accusing me wrongfully. If you'll just give me

a chance, I'll tell you all I know—which isn't much. I'm as anxious for your daughter's safety as you are. Do be sensible for a minute, and let's come to a proper understanding!"

He had clung tenaciously to the musket, and was still holding it in spite of Durban's efforts to draw it away.

A saner look came into the latter's face, as he listened to these urging words, and he relaxed his hold on the weapon.

"What is it you have to say?" watching Jessup narrowly.

"Toss the musket out there, where you can't get at it, and I'll talk to you."

Durban hesitated a moment, apparently fearing treachery; and then obeyed.

"Now, I hope we can get at the facts. You ought to know me too well, Mr. Durban, to think I would do anything to harm your daughter. What put such an idea in your head, anyway? and how comes it I find you out here?"

"What are you doing out here?" glaring at him distrustfully. "I suppose you know Jessie isn't at home?"

"I know that," looking him frankly in the face. "And that is why I'm here. I departed from the ranch before daylight on the morning she left, for the purpose of meeting some cowboys across the river."

Durban's air showed that he doubted the statement.

"You know, Mr. Durban, that I have been organizing a force of cowboys—picking one or two good men from each ranch—and that I hope to be able with them to rid the country of the cattle-thieves!"

"You don't believe me, eh?" as Durban still continued his reproachful and suspicious glances. "If you will hear me out, I think I can convince you that I am telling the truth."

"Go on!" Durban commanded, in a hoarse and unnatural voice.

"These cowboys were of the force I was gathering; and when I had had a talk with them, I returned to the ranch. When I did so, I found a letter on the door, written by Jessie to you. I ventured to read it, and then replaced it just as I had found it. That letter revealed to me that circumstantial evidence had led her to think me a prisoner of El Espada's men."

"Perhaps the conclusion was natural, under the circumstances. I ought to have informed her or Tanner that I was going away. Then no inference could have arisen."

The look of doubt on Durban's face began to vanish and to be replaced by indications of earnest interest.

"The ranch was deserted; and as I did not know when you would return, I took my pony, and followed immediately on the trail of your daughter's party. I fancied I could come up with them in a short time; when the error would be corrected, and they would go back with me to the ranch."

Matters did not turn out as I had expected, however. Instead of overtaking them, I fell in with a band of insurgents, who forced me to accompany them."

"Until this morning I remained with them; when I managed to escape. And here I am! I was aiming to make my own way across the hills, and so return to the ranch."

"Then, where is my daughter?" and a look of pain distorted Durban's features.

"I think she is in Alvarez," kindly and sympathetically. "I am almost sure she is!"

Durban looked at him, as if he would read the inmost secrets of his soul.

"You have been telling me the truth, Jessup?" a heart-broken quaver in his voice.

"As God is my witness, I have! I have told you nothing but the truth! Why should I deceive you, Durban?"

"Oh, I don't know!" and Durban pressed his hands to his throbbing temples. "I have been deceived so much that I don't know who to believe."

"You can trust me, Durban! In all this I have told you nothing but the truth!"

This was said with an appearance of great earnestness.

"The reason I think she is in Alvarez is, that I heard yesterday evening that a woman and some cowboys from across the river had been captured and taken there. The information was brought into camp by a man who had just come from the town. He brought dispatches from the commander of the forces in Alvarez to the officer holding me a prisoner."

"I don't suppose this bit of news was in the dispatches; but it became camp gossip soon after the courier's arrival, and so drifted to me. From that moment I determined to escape; and I accomplished it this morning."

"Then she is not in Carmencita, as Foster thought!"

"Ah! you have seen Foster! Perhaps that accounts for your recent attitude toward me?"

Durban glanced at him questioningly and sorrowfully.

"Tell me, Jessup! Are all men liars?"

"I don't understand you! Do you refer to Coates Foster? If you do, I can assure you that one man—and he bears that name—is a liar!"

His face was flushed; and his manner indi-

cated a fear that after all Durban had not credited his statement.

"I was thinking of Foster," with that same sorrowful look. "He lied to me, Jessup, if you have told the truth!"

Then, in a few brief sentences, he related the substance of Foster's statements to him, and told of the adventure which befell them after leaving the ranch.

Jessup listened to the story with marked attention, commenting now and then in his emphatic style.

"I am sorry for you, Durban! Words cannot express my feelings! You are suffering, and have suffered, too! It was because of me, and yet through no fault of mine, that your daughter was led into her present peril."

"I think she made a mistake in leaving the ranch as she did, when her information must have been of such an uncertain character."

"There is no need to discuss that now, however. She acted according to her best judgment. Neither of us can doubt that. What we must do now is to find some way to aid her. I'm willing to do all I can; and will place myself under your guidance, if you wish it."

"What can we do?" was Durban's troubled inquiry.

"We will have to be governed by circumstances. The only path open lies in the direction of Alvarez. Your daughter is there, as I fully believe; and if we expect to aid her, we must go there. What we're to do when we get there, future events must decide."

To retreat across the hills for the purpose of collecting another force would have been useless. If they accomplished anything, they must do it by craft and strategy. No force they could gather would be of any avail against the troops massed at Alvarez. It was a case in which one or two could do more than a hundred.

The situation was fully discussed; and, when they had laid their plans as well as possible, they set out together for the beleaguered town—though they knew not at the time that Alvarez was in a state of siege.

CHAPTER XXV.

THROUGH PRISON BARS.

"I DON'T like this hyer hencoop!" and for the hundredth time the restless eyes of Salmon Pike roved over the prison cell and its few belongings.

It was not a pleasant place in which to remain. Their quarters were cramped and narrow, and they were treated brutally, and only half-fed.

"If the Government troops would only throw a cannon-ball through this hyer thing an' knock a hole in it big enough fer us to crawl out of, I'd send 'em my card o' thanks!"

Jim Tanner was reclining on the dirty cot in the corner, listening in a sleepy way to the grumbling remarks of his companion.

"'Twouldn't be so nice, I 'low, if that ole punkin head o' yours should be in the way when that same cannon-ball come singin' along! It wouldn't be no fun to crawl out through the hole, if you had no eyes to see about you with an' no tongue to express your pleasure. I'll excuse the cannon-balls, thankee!"

They had heard the shots of skirmishers, and knew the forces of the Government were investing the place.

"My head's big enough to hold my brains; but it hain't very big, fer all that! I'd resk the cannon-ball, if they'd jist throw it this way. If they don't throw one purty soon, I'm a-goin' out of hyer, anyhow!"

"That's what you said las' night!" was Tanner's lazy comment. "An' I notice there ain't any hole in the wall yit!"

The day was well advanced; and Salmon Pike, as he looked out through the little barred window, could see the town below him and the plains country stretching beyond, where the armies of the opposing forces lay intrenched.

It was a sight suggestive of the terrors of war. On every side Alvarez was hemmed in by the soldiers of the regular Government. Inside the town, troops swarmed, seeming to be in constant motion; but on the outside, very little movement could be discerned. Far away at various points knots of officers could be seen; but very few of the soldiers were in sight. They were hidden behind the vast earthworks which had been erected.

This statement refers principally to the investing troops. The soldiers of the insurgents, being nearer the town, and located so they could be better seen from Pike's point of vision, were more readily descried.

A number of heavy guns had been mounted, and it was to these Pike's thoughts turned when he spoke of the battering cannon-balls.

"I hain't been ready, yit," referring to his expressed determination to break out. "The rebels have had too good a chance to watch us; an' I reckon ef they ketched us a-tryin' to make tracks from hyer, we'd be shot in short order. But they've got their hands full a-watchin' other folks, now. You bet they have! An' if them other folks don't walk in hyer before a week, then I'm off in my guessin'."

Tanner got up from the cot and approached

the window, and glanced with Pike over the martial scene spread out before them.

"I don't see how we'd ever git through there, if they'd jist turn us loose an' tell us to go. Talkin' about a hencoop! If this hyer town of Alvarez hain't a hencoop at this blessed minute, then I'm a no-count sheep-herder!"

It did seem that Jim Tanner was right in this; right so far as his statements of the chances of escape were concerned. If they could avoid the troops within the city, (taking it for granted they could get out of the prison,) they would then have to pass the lines of both armies.

"I guess we're in hyer to stay!" and with a sigh Tanner turned back toward the cot. "When you've got your plans all figured out, jist tell 'em to me; and then, I calc'late I'll tell you you're a blamed fool!"

Pike smiled in his grim way, nowise displeased with the rough comment. He had come to know Tanner well at the ranch and during their confinement in this cell. Tanner's words were sometimes sharp-pointed, but his heart was in the right place; and none knew this better than Salmon Pike.

For a long time Pike stood at the window—or barred opening, for it did not deserve the name of window—and studied the location of the troops both within and without the town. He was satisfied he could make his way out of the prison, when the time came for the attempt; and he was studying how they could best avoid the perils that lay beyond the prison walls.

He said no more to Tanner until night descended and the time came for the effort he proposed to make.

"You see them bars up there?" pointing to the window through which the moonlight fell. "I'm a-goin' to walk through them bars jist like a red mowin'-machine through high grass. You don't think I kin do it? It hain't a-goin' to be half as much trouble to git through there as it will be to git to [the ground] after we're onc't through!"

His earnest manner and strong statement caused Tanner to get up from his corner and regard him curiously.

Pike had removed one of his shoes, and was now working at the heel of it. He gave this a strong wrench, and it moved as if on a screw. Then he slowly and carefully unscrewed the heel from the shoe, and held it up for Tanner's inspection.

"Ever see anything like that?" pride evinced in the words.

The heel was hollow, and carefully coiled up in it were some odd-looking instruments. Pike took them out; and Tanner saw then that they were infinitesimally small saws. They straightened themselves in Pike's hands, as he removed them from the heel.

The other heel was served in the same way; and from it there came a small vial and some yarn thread.

Tanner stared at Pike's crouching figure with undisguised amazement.

"Them's the very best insterments fer the bizness to be had in the United States of America. There was never an iron bar made that they won't walk through, if they're on'y given time. These saws air 'specially made fer the purpose; an' this yarn an' this acid will eat like a house afire!"

"I say, Pike, you hain't in the burgular bizness?"

"Nary! I hain't in the burgular bizness; but I've spent a good many of the years of my life in huntin' down that style o' men; an' I've foun' these things come in mighty handy on several 'casions!"

This was the nearest Pike had ever come yet to revealing the nature of his calling; and even as he said these words, he glanced at Tanner as if he seriously doubted, even in this case, the wisdom of making the statement.

He approached the bars of the window, and selecting one applied to it a drop of acid. He then placed the yarn string against it, and began to saw away in a very earnest and energetic manner.

When he had worked with the string for a while, he took up one of the saws and applied it to the bar.

Tanner watched every motion with the greatest interest.

"Tain't quite as fast as sawin' stove-wood," Pike observed, quaintly. "But I read in the Reader, when I was a boy, how a mud-turtle beat a jack-rabbit in a walkin' race; an' he done it by jist everlastin'ly 'tendin' to his bizness!"

If anything could be accomplished by pertinacity, Salmon Pike was the man for the purpose; and this was brought out very clearly in the course of the next few hours.

"Rome wa'n't built in a day, but we're a-goin' to git out o' hyer in less'n a night!" he asserted, as he relinquished his place to Tanner, who continued the work under his instructions.

By thus exchanging, the work of cutting through the bars progressed with comparative rapidity.

Almost an hour was consumed in severing one. Two of them were removed; and then the way out of the prison was clear.

The distance from the window to the ground was over ten feet, and neither cared to try to

jump it. By knotting together the scanty bed-clothing, a rope was made of sufficient length to reach to within a few feet of the earth; and by means of this rope they descended in safety.

There were sentinels beyond the prison walls, though none were stationed near the window. Owing to the darkness, they could not see these men, though Pike had carefully noted their positions before the coming of night.

Lights twinkled everywhere, for the excitement in the town was too intense to permit the inhabitants to sleep much. Only those worn out by long watching and fatigue gave themselves up to slumber. With a beleaguering army camped about them and a battle imminent, they sat in their houses in a fear-stricken way, not knowing but that any moment they would hear the booming of the cannon announcing the commencement of the long-expected conflict.

The streets were filled with troopers; and, when Tanner and Pike had made their way with great caution out of and beyond the prison, they found that their greatest danger would come from these.

"If we only had some soldiers' clothes!" Tanner exclaimed, wistfully.

"But we hain't; and therefore we'll have to sneak along the best way we can. Keep to the shadows, my boy, and if any one comes toward you, flatten yourself like a pancake!"

Pike assumed the lead.

He had carefully noted the location of the nearest earthworks, and he now made his way toward these, using every precaution that ingenuity could suggest to prevent their observation.

He succeeded so well that in a short time they approached the innermost line of sentinels.

Here the really difficult work of escaping commenced. There were camp-fires burning at intervals, each lighting up the ground for some distance around it. But, as if to repay for this, the shadows beyond these bright circles were of the densest character. By keeping well within these shadows, and watching the sentinels as they walked to and fro on their beats, they managed to evade detection.

They had passed beyond this danger line, and were beginning to breathe more freely. Both were on their hands and knees, Pike crawling slowly along in the lead. Suddenly, and without warning, he came face to face with a man who was moving in the same manner in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TAKEN AS A SPY.

PIKE stopped in dismay. Were they to be discovered after all?

This fear was dissipated as quickly as it came by the suggestion that this could not be a soldier, for a soldier would have no occasion to move along in that way.

The other had also halted, and was staring at him through the gloom.

"What's the matter?" Tanner whispered, not understanding why Pike had stopped.

The words served as a key to unlock the mystery. They were heard and the voice recognized by the man who was so strangely facing Pike.

"Is that you, Jim Tanner?" was the whispered query.

Salmon Pike was surprised beyond measure. He could scarcely believe he heard aright. The voice asking the question was Giles Jessup's.

Tanner could not comprehend the state of affairs forward, and so scrambled up as fast as he could, gaining the old man's side before the latter made answer:

"It's Jim Tanner, an' it's me! An' if I'm not mistaken, you're Jessup."

Another man now revealed himself, crawling forward through the gloom as Jessup had done. This was Sylvester Durban.

The two were endeavoring to make their way through the mass of soldiers into Alvarez, for the purpose of seeking Jessie Durban. They had proceeded thus far, when fate threw them in the way of the escaping prisoners.

A few questions and answers served to fully reveal to each other their identity; and then the four, lying flat on the earth and with heads close together, began to discuss the situation in which they found themselves.

"You say you are making your way out of Alvarez?" Durban eagerly asked. "Have you seen anything of my daughter?"

Pike had really seen nothing of her since they were brought together to the place; but he had heard of her, and proceeded to give the anxious father the benefit of his information.

"I asked one of the prison guards about her, on'y yist'day; an' he tole me me that Wentworth had come and got the gov'nor to let him take her home with him. So you needn't worry, Durban, about her a-tall! She's all right, an' in good han's!"

Tears of gratitude came to Durban's eyes, as these facts were made known to him; and, by the tremor of his voice, those with whom he was conversing saw how he had suffered.

Pike and Tanner recounted their adventure before being brought to the prison, and the story of their incarceration; while Jessup and Durban had narratives of equal interest to relate.

"You're not goin' in there?" Pike protested, when Durban announced that as his determination. "Take my advice, an' try to git through the lines with us. You can't do any good in Alvarez, an' you'll be certain shore to run yourself into trouble!"

"But I must see Jessie!" was Durban's firm declaration. "I must see for myself that she is alive and well. Can you tell me in what quarter of the town I can find Wentworth's house?"

Pike and Tanner urged him to abandon the idea. To them it seemed a most useless and reckless undertaking. So long as he had no positive knowledge of his daughter's condition, he might be pardoned for making so desperate a venture in her behalf. But now that he knew where she was, and that she was in good and safe hands, to make any further effort in that direction seemed to them inexcusable.

Jessup had before this been quite as anxious to penetrate into the town as was Durban, and at first stated his intention of going on with the latter. But the earnest entreaties and arguments of their friends were sufficient to show him his folly.

"There'll come a fight," said Tanner, "an' it won't be in the town, but on the prairie out there. An' it won't be with cannon, but with muskets and bayonets. That's my idee; an' I think you'll find, when it's over, that the idee's correct."

"The Gover'ment's a-goin' to jist everlastin'ly lick these rebels; an' when the Gover'ment troops march into the town, Dominique Gervase an' his friends will be down on their marrer-bones a-beggin' fer mercy, an' won't have no time to spend in thinkin' of the prisoners they brought in."

Salmon Pike coincided in this view of the situation.

Sylvester Durban was, however, obdurate. He had made up his mind to see his daughter. He wanted to be near her in this time of danger, and shelter her with his strong arm. This struck him as his duty. Wentworth would have his wife to look after, and he ought to be there to look after the security of his daughter.

"I'm going through, gentlemen!" he announced, with grim determination. "I can do no good out here."

Jessup now came forward with a plan. Alvarez would probably not fall into the hands of the Government forces for a day or two. In the mean time he could again penetrate the lines to the outside, and might be able to gather a few faithful men who would act as an escort for Jessie and the Wentworths from the city after it had fallen.

His plans were immature and might fail, though he hoped for the best from them.

But Durban would listen to no word of dissuasion; and as the others would not accompany him, they were compelled to sorrowfully watch him as he moved silently away into the gloom in the direction of the town.

He had not gone far, when they were startled by a musket shot, and heard the cries of a sentinel.

"They have killed him!" Jessup gasped, his heart torn with fear and anguish.

Pike writhed away like a snake to determine the cause of the commotion.

He was back in a very short time.

"He wasn't shot!" he panted, almost breathless from the haste with which he had made the trip. "He was fired at by the sentinel, an' was then captured. I seen the soldiers a-leadin' him off toward the town."

Pike also stated that, from the few words of Mexican he could understand, the idea prevailed among the guards and other soldiers that Durban was not alone, and that search would reveal his companions.

"He's got hisself into the wu'st kind of a hobble! They think he's a spy, an' I'm afeard he'll have a hard time of it. An' we'll git ourselves into the same kind of a hobble, if we don't scratch gravel mighty lively!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

SYLVESTER DURBAN realized that he had fallen into deadly peril. An incautious movement had revealed him to one of the sentinels. He had disregarded the low command to halt, and the shot had instantly followed. The bullet buried itself in the earth just in front of his head; and thus started he had leaped up and commenced to run.

The shot had aroused all the soldiers in the vicinity, and the consequence was that he speedily found himself hemmed in, and was forced to surrender.

He did not understand the talk that took place, and so did not know that he was supposed to be a Government spy, who was making his way into the camp for the purpose of gathering information. He found this out all too soon, however.

He was placed in charge of a small company of soldiers, and by them escorted to what had formerly been the governor's palace. It was now occupied by the insurgent commander and his staff.

A council of war was in progress. The insurgents were beginning to realize the desperate-

ness of their condition, and were discussing the advisability of making a sortie in force against the enemy on the morrow.

This was the situation, when Durban was conducted before the council by his guards.

As soon as the commander understood what the prisoner was suspected of, he turned on him a harsh look, in which, however, curiosity was strongly mingled.

"Bring him before me!" he ordered. "I wish to question him."

He saw by Durban's face that he was an American.

"I presume you speak Mexican, senor?"

The contrast between him and Durban was most marked. Durban's clothing was torn, and covered with dirt and dust, and his appearance was worn and haggard in the extreme. The officer, on the other hand, was brilliantly dressed in a uniform that sparkled with gold lace and medals. His staff was attired in an equally gorgeous manner.

Durban looked appealingly from one to the other. He did not understand his questioner. Unfortunately the insurgent chief attributed his silence to a wrong motive.

"Dog of a spy!" he hissed, frowning severely. "Speak up, or it will be the worse for you! You came here under instructions from the officers of the Government! What were you sent to ascertain?"

"Will no one act as interpreter for me?" Durban asked, glancing imploringly over the brilliant throng.

There was one there who understood him, and who seemed to believe he was actuated by the truth. This was a member of the general's staff.

He spoke up in Durban's behalf, offering his services.

Thereupon a series of questions was propounded to Durban. He answered in a concise and straightforward manner, recounting the story of his adventures in behalf of his daughter.

His narrative was greeted with a sneer of unbelief.

"Where does this man Wentworth live?" the chief queried, curling his lips disdainfully. "I know of no such person!"

"His home is in Carmencita!"

"Bah! It is likely that a citizen of Carmencita should be here, as you say. You were coming to see him? Slipping past the sentinels of two armies for that purpose? And all that you might pay a visit to your daughter, when, according to your own account, she is safe and well!"

Durban believed that, on the part of the officer, these were mere words. Very likely he knew Wentworth was in the city, and had knowledge of the fact that that gentleman had secured Jessie's release from prison. Yet he chose to believe Durban a spy in the pay of the regular Government.

"I will hear you again in the morning!" he said, beckoning to the soldiers who had brought Durban to that place. "I cannot spare you any more time now. I will have some inquiry made, that I may learn, if possible, the truth or falsity of what you say. But I wish to speak plainly! I do not believe your story; and you may prepare for the worst. You know the fate of a spy!"

He turned again to the officers grouped about him, for the purpose of further considering the advisability of a sortie; and Durban, despondent and almost heart-broken, was led away by the guard.

Salmon Pike, with Jessup and Tanner, succeeded in making their way through the many dangers that beset them, and arrived finally at the open country beyond the opposing camps.

Pike had halted and hesitated several times, however. He could not remove from his mind the pitiful sight he had so recently witnessed—that of Durban being led away a captive. He had great fears for Durban's safety. The temper of the insurgents was very bitter at that time, and they were particularly hostile to Americans.

A council was held, in which it was resolved that Tanner and Jessup should use their best efforts at collecting a force of friends.

"I'm a-goin' back, though!" Pike asserted, after listening carefully to their plans. "If you can git these men together, well an' good. You'll be too late, though, I'm a-thinkin', to help where help is at this minit most needed. I've argued all along that the girl hain't in much danger; but if her dad hain't shot to-morry mornin' as a spy, then I'll say I don't know nuthin'."

"I tell you what, I'm a-goin' back in there, to do what I can to help the ole man, if it is risky!"

Jessup was really anxious to have Pike do this very thing, though he had heretofore not said so.

In as cool and dispassionate a manner as possible, they discussed the perils which would result to Pike in this undertaking.

Their separation was in the nature of a solemn leave-taking, for they felt it was doubtful if they should ever meet again; then Pike turned back toward the low-burning camp-fires, while Jessup and Tanner continued on their way.

It required two hours of very tedious and toilsome work for the old man to again pene-

trate the lines; and it was nearly daybreak when he approached the house occupied by the Wentworths. The finding of this had cost him much trouble and danger. He would never have found it, if he had not encountered an American and been by him directed.

His rap brought Wentworth to the door; and when Wentworth saw who stood there, he ushered him in without a word.

"Is my hair a-standin' straight up, like a minstrel fright-wig? Pike asked, removing his hat in a pathetic way. "If it hain't, it's not because I've not been skeered enough times! If you've got a suit of soldier clothes, for goodness' sake haul 'em out an' let me have 'em!"

"I've the clothes! But first tell me where you have come from, and what brought you here?"

Pike's coming had aroused Mrs. Wentworth and Jessie Durban; and they now entered the room, wonder and alarm visible in their faces.

In a few hasty words, the old man revealed to them why he was there.

It was pitiful to behold Jessie's grief when she learned of her father's danger.

"Cheer up!" said Wentworth, endeavoring to console her. "I do not think the case is as bad as it looks. I will visit the general; and when he knows the truth, I think he will order Mr. Durban to be released."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TEARFUL PLEA.

"I do not think I can do anything for your friend," and the general looked coldly at Wentworth.

Wentworth had gone immediately to the officer's headquarters, and was given an interview.

"But the man is as innocent as a babe!" he anxiously asserted. "I see you think he is a spy, but you are mistaken. He is an American ranchman, from the other side of the river, and tried to make his way through the lines for the purpose of seeing his daughter, who is now at my house."

"I assure you, sir, he has nothing whatever to do with the Government forces!"

The words made no apparent impression on the insurgent commander, though so earnestly spoken.

"I have had inquiries made concerning this man, and all the information obtainable goes to show that he is a spy. In saying this, I do not mean to discredit your statements. The fact is, my dear sir, you think you know all about him, but you don't!"

Wentworth's unfaltering courage almost failed him, as he heard these ominous words.

"There is a man here in Alvarez who knows him well," the officer went on, "and that man's testimony is conclusive!"

"Who is he?" Wentworth tremblingly questioned.

"I don't suppose you'll recognize the name. He is one of our officers; and is known as Dominique Gervase."

New light dawned on Wentworth.

"Can I see the gentleman? I know him well."

He might have added that he never knew any good of him; but this would not have been politic. He began to understand, now, something of the force that was moving the general to the condemnation of Durban. Gervase's hatred of Giles Jessup was intense; and, if he could stab him in this indirect manner, he would not hesitate to do it, though it should involve the sacrifice of a life.

"Can I see Senor Gervase?" as the officer did not immediately reply. "I think I can show him that his testimony was erroneous."

The general seemed to weary of the subject.

"It is useless!" he declared, with a dismissing wave of the hand. "The case has already been fully discussed, and the judgment cannot now be reversed. The man is a spy; and he dies at sunrise!"

There was a delegation at the door, clamoring for admittance; and Wentworth was rudely shouldered aside.

"He shall not die!" was his determined assertion, as he hurried into the narrow street.

The first faint radiance of day was beginning to color the eastern sky, as he hastened with rapid strides homeward.

He wished he could conceal from Jessie and Mrs. Wentworth the sad news of which he was the bearer. This he could not do; for if Durban's life was saved, it must be through Jessie's instrumentality.

His face, as he came through the doorway, heralded ill tidings.

Jessie sat pale and trembling, waiting for the words she feared to hear. Pike was also in the room. He had been doing what he could to disseminate an atmosphere of cheer; but even his buoyant heart sunk, as he looked into Wentworth's face.

"I can do nothing!" was Wentworth's statement. "But that does not imply that nothing can be done. In fact, I'm still very hopeful. Mr. Durban has been condemned as a spy, and principally on the testimony of Dominique Gervase."

A sob came from Jessie; and the troubled look on the faces of the others deepened.

"I intend to see the commander again, and I shall take Jessie with me."

"Hain't they anything I can do?" Pike nervously inquired. "It's jist nacherally killin' me to set hyer like a bump on a log, an' not be able to do a thing. Jist find out somethin' fer me to do, will ye?"

"You don't know any one here?"

"Nary! Wisht I did!"

"I don't see that your presence would help any," in a kindly tone. "Probably it would only serve to complicate matters. I shall take Jessie and Mrs. Wentworth; and if the general hasn't a heart of stone, we'll bring Durban back with us."

As no time was to be lost, as soon as the women could prepare for the visit, he left the house in company with them.

The light had so increased that objects were plainly visible, as they moved along the street. The thoroughfare was crowded with soldiers, who gave them many curious glances. But, unheeding these, they pressed right on until the governor's palace was reached.

At the bottom of a flight of stone steps leading up to the palace entrance, they encountered Dominique Gervase. The rascal gave them a quick glance, and would have hurried away had Wentworth's voice not stopped him.

"See here, Dominique! We are on our way to see the general, to try and secure the release of Sylvester Durban. He has been condemned as a spy; and I understand you gave evidence against him. Can you not go with us, and undo the wrong you have committed? You surely can have no wish to bring about the death of an innocent man!"

Gervase quailed like the guilty thing he was, and stammered a hasty denial.

"You will go with us, then? If you gave in no evidence we shall have no trouble in securing Durban's release!"

The cowardly Mexican would not, however, stay to listen to his urging. A crowd pressed by at that moment; and, mingling with these, he darted away.

Wentworth did not attempt to follow him; but led the ladies up the flight of steps, and informed the guard of the nature of their errand. This individual told them that no one was to be admitted; but, wholly disregarding this, Jessie pushed by him and hastened into the building.

There was no one to whom the sentinel could call to stop her; and he felt that he must remain at his post to bar out Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth, and others who were constantly desirous of entering.

Without heeding the command shouted after her by the guard, or once looking back to see if she was followed, Jessie hastened on.

Her knowledge of Spanish was very imperfect, but she had sufficient command of the language to make her inquiries intelligible, and was directed to a room where a number of men were congregated.

She walked boldly up to these, and as they stepped aside without questioning her right to pass, she soon found herself in the presence of the general with whom Wentworth had had the conversation only a short time before.

This officer looked at her in a surprised way, as she ran quickly forward and knelt at his feet, tears streaming down her face.

She had singled him out by the exceptional brilliancy of his uniform.

"Ob, sir!" she implored, lifting to him her clasped hands. "Will you not spare my poor father?"

The words were broken, but they were filled with an indescribable and pathetic eloquence.

He looked beyond her, as if to inquire why she had been admitted. But the question remained unasked. Her attitude and the wondrous beauty of her pale face, as well as the deep distress depicted in it, touched him.

"What is it you wish, child?" bending on her a look of commiseration. "Of whom do you speak?"

"Of my father, sir! Sylvester Durban. He has been condemned as a spy. Ob, sir! He is not guilty. His great love for me drove him to penetrate the lines. I assure you sir, he is not a spy. Will you not release him? Oh! will you not release him?"

The general fidgeted uneasily, when he understood the character of her mission.

"I fear it is not in my power to do what you ask. He was condemned by the council. The matter has passed beyond my jurisdiction."

Sobbing as if her heart would break, Jessie crept to his feet, and repeated her supplications.

"Ob, if you would but hear me!" she panted, driven wild by her great fear. "I will become his hostage. Release him, and send me to prison in his place. Sacrifice me, if you will! But oh, sir! spare him! Spare my poor father!"

The officer turned from her, and spoke to one of his aides.

"Send for Wentworth. I would have a further word with him."

"He is at the door," Jessie interrupted. "The guard would not admit him. Oh, sir! if you'll only hear Mr. Wentworth! He knows my father; and knows how innocent he is of this charge."

The aid hastened away, returning shortly with both Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth.

"Will you become surety for this man, if I release him?" the general asked, bending on Wentworth a keen glance. "I have heard your statement, and I have just listened to the statement of this girl. It may be that the council erred, or was too hasty in rendering a decision. I cannot reverse their judgment, but I can suspend sentence. The man is to be shot at sunrise. If you will become his surety, I will extend the time indefinitely."

"But remember!" a dangerous light gleaming in his dark eyes. "If he escapes, or makes any effort to do so, your own life will pay the penalty!"

"I accept the responsibility!" and Wentworth proudly folded his arms over his broad chest. "I will take Mr. Durban home with me, where you can find him at any time you desire. I know him to be an innocent man; and I can guarantee that he will not try to leave Alvarez until such time as he has permission to go!"

The general hastily scribbled an order which he handed to a member of his staff, who saluted and immediately left the room.

"That is an order for his release. You understand that the conditions of the release must not be violated!"

Jessie poured out a flood of thanks.

The interview was at an end; and as no more was to be said, they retreated from the place, their hearts overflowing with gratitude.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RIVER RUSTLERS.

WITH his horse foam-flecked, a courier of the the insurgent forces drew rein in the midst of Peel Skinner's camp. Skinner was now a full-fledged officer, and was aiding the insurgents with all his men. The River Rustlers were not attached to any command, but were engaged in guerrilla service.

It was a pleasant change for them, from being hunted and driven like wolves in the mountains; and they saw a pardon for all, at the end of the term of their enlistment, if the chances of war turned in favor of the rebels.

Skinner was an able officer, and delighted in nothing more than in leading a guerrilla band. Under cover of the necessities of war, he could loot and pillage at will.

He was sitting lazily on a fallen tree, watching with abstracted gaze the games in which some of his men were indulging. From this pleasant occupation the coming of the courier aroused him.

The latter singled him out by the saber that hung at his side; and, riding up to him, extended a written dispatch, after saluting.

From the appearance of the courier and his horse, El Espada knew the dispatch was of an important character; and he hurriedly tore it open and read it.

It was a military order, commanding him to proceed with all haste to the southern bridge over the Pinto River, and there assist in holding in check the Government forces that were pressing the insurgents northward.

The siege of Alvarez was still on; but if the Government received sufficient aid from the South, the place could be taken by storm, or compelled to capitulate.

Peel Skinner knew this quite as well as did those who were at the head of the rebellion. He knew, also, that if Alvarez fell, Carmencita could not be expected to hold out a great while.

Carmencita was the Northern stronghold of the insurrectionists, and Alvarez the Southern. The alcalde of Carmencita was one of the rebel leaders, and was said to be in command of the forces holding that town.

The courier, when he had delivered his dispatch, rode away, though not as swiftly as he had come; and Skinner called to a man who had been seated not far distant:

"It looks as if there was to be some fighting ahead!" holding the letter up for the other to see it.

"So much the better! I'm getting horribly sick and tired of lying around camp this way doing nothing."

The speaker was Coates Foster, so disguised that his most intimate friend would not have recognized him.

Foster had not had a very pleasant time since his separation from the cowboys under Durban, at the time they were charged and scattered. For two or three days he had wandered about, fearing to approach the various bodies of troops he saw, until he finally stumbled on some of El Espada's men. He had accompanied these into camp, and remained with them since. It was not a congenial life, and he was getting very tired of it, as he stated.

"I don't mind action," and Skinner showed his teeth in an evil way, "but it's not this kind of action. The chances of getting shot are entirely too good. I prefer the guerrilla business to open warfare."

The order, was peremptory, however, and he was given no option.

After discussing the matter for a short time with Foster, he called his men, and read to them the instructions brought by the courier. Most

of them seemed pleased with the knowledge that active and stern excitement lay before them; and, in a comparatively short time, all was in readiness for the march toward the south.

The distance to be traversed was long, and they did not reach their destination on the Pinto River until daybreak on the following morning.

A small body of troops was there ahead of them; but Skinner saw at a glance that the combined force would not be sufficient to hold in check the advance of the Government army. As the ranking officer he took command, and began hasty preparations for doing all he could.

"We'll never hold this bridge!" he said, confidentially, to Foster. "But I don't know that it matters much. There's bound to come a big battle within less than a week, according to my judgment; and that battle will go a long way toward settling which side is to win in this contest. If we could hold back the troops that are coming, it would give our fellows a better chance, though; and I shall do all I can along that line. But they ought to send us more men; every man they can spare. I'm much afraid we're going to be whipped in the end, for our officers are not managing the campaign right. There's altogether too much gold lace and red-tape and style about the way they do things!"

As will be seen, El Espada was not in a very hopeful mood. He was beginning to realize that the insurrection was not as strong, nor as ably conducted as he had fancied when he gave in his adherence to that cause.

He had scarcely taken command, when scouts came in with reports that the Government troops were moving in force along the various roads converging on the Pinto bridge.

El Espada immediately sent a body of men across the river to fell the timber over those roads for the purpose of obstructing the advance. He also hurried a considerable portion of his command to the other bank, and there threw up temporary defenses.

The axmen did their work so well, that the advance column of the division that was moving on the river, did not get into position before the bridge until the afternoon was well advanced. Here they threw out a strong skirmish line, for the purpose of testing the insurgents' strength.

El Espada's command had been considerably increased throughout the day; and the skirmishers received so sharp a check, that they fell back with the belief that the force in front of them was much stronger than it really was.

A heavier force was pushed forward, and some sharp fighting followed, lasting until nearly sunset. Then, seeing that he would soon be overwhelmed and his command annihilated, El Espada withdrew his men in good order to the northern bank of the stream; and then the bridge was fired in a half-dozen places, and some of the principal timbers sawn through.

The river, at that time, was not fordable at any point on either side for a number of miles; and as Espada's men took up their line of retreat, their commander had the satisfaction of knowing that he delayed the Government advance for at least twenty-four hours.

His instructions were to retreat on Alvarez, and unite his force with another that was gathering to assist in raising the siege of that city.

CHAPTER XXX.

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

WHEN Sylvester Durban was released from the Alvarez prison, he was met at the prison gate by Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth, and his daughter Jessie. Salmon Pike had feared to venture forth in the open light of day, even though attired in the military garb furnished him by Wentworth. It was almost certain he would be seen and recognized as an escaped prisoner.

The meeting between father and daughter was of the most fervent character. Only a short time before, Durban had been informed of the decision of the council and of the fate in store for him. He was to be conducted to an open plot of ground at the rear of the prison, and there shot as a spy.

He had begged to be permitted to see his daughter. He had been rudely refused this request, and had endeavored to prepare himself for the worst. It can be imagined, therefore, what a thrill of joy swept over him when he was informed that sentence had been suspended in his case, and that he was to be released; and when he followed the guard outside, and beheld there Jessie and the Wentworths, his thankfulness and joy knew no bounds.

He was conducted at once to the Wentworth residence, where he was warmly greeted by Salmon Pike.

That worthy had continuously paced the floor in a fit of feverish impatience, hoping and despairing by turns.

"Set down!" he said. "Set down!" and he wrung Durban's hand with a warmth indicative of his pleasure. "I'd rather set eyes on you than I would on Joe Dobson. Man alive, but you're lookin' peaked! Look as if you'd been ground through a patent threshin'-machine. But, set down! Set down!"

There was one thing that greatly troubled Wentworth; and now that he was where he could freely express his thoughts, he spoke of it.

While at the prison he had heard some bits of talk concerning the escaped prisoners.

The fact that Pike and Tanner had cut their way out of their cell had only become known a short time before. As soon as it was light enough for the guard to see, the dangling ladder formed of the bed-clothing had been discovered as it swayed mournfully in the wind. An alarm had been given, and it was quickly known what prisoners were missing. The talk which Wentworth had heard informed him that a belief prevailed that the prisoners were in hiding in town.

"If they should make a search, they would visit the houses of the Americans first," he said, as they talked over the subject. "And if they should find Mr. Pike here, he would not only be dragged back to prison, but the liberty of all of us would be jeopardized."

It was an alarming situation, and none knew it better than did Salmon Pike. He was distressed that he should thus bring his friends into peril.

"I'll go and give myself up," he declared, with his customary unselfishness. "That's the safest thing to do. Nobody can't git hurt then but me! It won't never do fer me to be found hyer in hidin'. I'll go and give myself up!"

He arose as if to carry his plan into immediate execution.

"But we have something to say about that!" and Wentworth laid a detaining hand on the old man's shoulder. "I shall consent to nothing of the kind. What risks there are, we will take together!"

"But you hain't thought!" Pike protested. "Hyar you've gone an' become security fer Mr. Durban; an' you're on your good behavior, as one may say. What'll be the result if I'm found hyer? You'll be considered a traitor, er wuss; an' Durban will be dragged back to jail an' shot as a spy. The resk is too great fer us to take it together!"

"You haven't been found yet, and I don't intend you shall be!" and Wentworth essayed to smile. "There is a closet in one of the rooms of this house, and we'll put you in it."

"I think this house must have been owned by a thief, oncel!" and he looked curiously at the walls. "That closet is a treasure in its way; at least, it promises to be now. It will defy a very close inspection. I only ran across it the other day. It is built into the adobe wall; and I believe it was made to store stolen goods in."

Salmon Pike was not so easily satisfied. Even after he had looked at the closet, he shook his head doubtfully. He felt that the danger was too great to be needlessly run.

"Now, see here!" and Wentworth frowned as severely as possible. "I won't listen to any of your arguments. You are here, and here you will stay, if it does involve all of us. You must stay at least until nightfall. Then, perhaps, you can make your way out by means of those disguising clothes."

The sudden crash of musketry beyond the limits of the town brought the conversation to an abrupt finish.

Wentworth and Durban, with the ladies, ascended to the flat roof of the building to gain a view of what was taking place.

A sortie in force had been pushed out, and the two small armies had come within striking distance. The smoke from the musketry fire almost hid everything; though they could see charging columns of men, and now and then could hear their excited yells. Then the cannon, mounted on the earthworks, opened with a roar that shook the building, and the work of carnage began in earnest.

"It is a dreadful sight!" Jessie exclaimed, turning pale and faint. "Let us go below."

It was, indeed, a dreadful sight—this deadly strife, where men were baring their bosoms to plunging shot and shell, and rushing wildly to conflict as if to a banquet. It was a feast the spectators were looking upon, but it was a feast of Death!

Wentworth and Durban, being made of sterner stuff, remained upon the housetop, witnesses of the fearful scene that was being enacted upon the plain beyond the city.

The fight was of short duration, however. The insurgents were driven back, after suffering heavy loss, and the town was more closely invested than ever; for, after beating back their enemies, the Government forces advanced their position.

Fortunately for the little company gathered that day in the Wentworth residence, no search was made for the prisoners who had escaped. The insurgents were too busily occupied with other matters. Their condition was becoming hourly more desperate. Rations were growing scarce; and if help did not come from the outside, they were doomed.

The Wentworths and their guests were not displeased with the knowledge that the fall of Alvarez was near. Pike, however, did not propose to remain in the city until it should capitulate. His danger was constant and threatening—involving not only himself but his friends.

Hence, with the recurrence of night, he sadly shook hands with them all, and slipped out of the Wentworth residence, disguised in the military clothing.

Wentworth had urged him to remain, declar-

ing a belief that Alvarez would be forced to surrender on the following day; but Pike, when he had once made up his mind to do a thing, was not easily turned from his resolution.

There were many alarms during the hours of darkness, for the people within the city were wrought up to the highest possible tension. With one exception these alarms boded no ill to any one domiciled at Wentworth's.

Shortly after midnight, a sharp rap sounded on the door. It aroused Wentworth, though he did not immediately respond to it. The peril of the times rendered him cautious. But when it was repeated again and again in a very emphatic and suggestive way, he drew on his clothing, and carefully opened the door.

He saw before him Dominique Gervase and a number of men.

He would have drawn back at this sight; but Gervase thrust his broad shoulders into the doorway thus preventing Wentworth from barring him out.

"It's no use," said Gervase, with an evil leer, advancing straight into the room, followed by some of his men. "You've got some people here that we want, and we mean to have them!" Wentworth stared at him in a helpless and stupefied way.

"You are mistaken," thinking that Salmon Pike was referred to by Dominique. "There is no one here you can want!"

"That shows you don't know as much as you might!" glancing toward the men back of him. "We have come for Sylvester Durban and his daughter!"

Wentworth uttered an expostulation.

"That's all right! We mean to take them away from here, just the same!" Will you be kind enough to go and tell them so? Or shall we be forced to make them go with us, just as they are?"

The loudly-spoken words had aroused Durban, who was sleeping in an adjoining apartment. He hurried into the room, now, only half-dressed.

"Ah, here is one! Will you be kind enough, Mr. Wentworth, to summon the other?"

"This is an outrage, sir!" Wentworth exclaimed, humiliated and angered almost beyond endurance. "By what right do you demand this?"

The look on Gervase's countenance became fairly fiendish.

"By the right of might! My dear sir, the right that rules the world!"

"If you push this matter, I shall complain of you to the general. I can see you contemplate something unauthorized and wholly unknown to him."

"Bah! the days of his power are numbered. The city will be occupied by the Government army before morning. The details of the capitulation have already been acceded to. Complain to him if you like. Bring forth the girl, or I will go after her!"

Wentworth knew not what fate might lie in store for Durban and his daughter, and with all his might resisted Dominique's demands. Durban likewise implored and entreated. But all to no avail. Dominique had come there with his plans well formed and determined on, and could not be turned aside.

Jessie Durban was aroused and acquainted with the Mexican's order; and she and her father were borne away by Dominique's men, to their own great distress and the distress of their friends.

The city was in a turmoil. The dissolution of the military power now governing it was at hand. The general had wished to hold out longer, hoping relief might come. In this he was opposed by a number of his officers. The dissensions had extended to the troops garrisoning the place, and half of them were in revolt. Alvarez was, consequently, in a state closely bordering on anarchy.

At such a time, men of Gervase's character—disturbers and malcontents—are always thrown to the surface; and so it was now. Men of that stamp were virtually exercising what little authority still existed—and exercising it for their personal benefit.

Hence, the way was clear for Gervase to work his own pleasure; and, as he made his way along the streets, he was now and then greeted by one from among the many groups of rioters.

He pushed on to the eastern limits of the city. Here a number of people were collecting, with the determination of going boldly over to the enemy. To these he added his force; and when the crowd had swelled to dimensions sufficient to satisfy the leaders, they marched in scornful procession past the few troops still remaining in the earthworks.

As Durban witnessed this, his hopes arose. He believed that when the surrender should be made to the forces of the Government, he and his daughter could not be longer held by Gervase. But he was doomed to disappointment.

The officers of the Government, considering them fugitives and non-combatants, did not approach them; but merely opened their lines and permitted them to pass to the plain beyond.

Durban would have called out and told his story, but was prevented by Gervase.

They had no more than reached the plains be-

yond the outermost line of earthworks, when they were approached by a body of horsemen.

Durban's hopes sunk to the deepest depths when he knew who these men were.

They were the insurgent band of El Espada, and commanded by that dreaded individual.

The prisoners found, as they believed, that they were not alone in their misery. There was another who seemed to be held as they were; and that was Coates Foster.

The bringing of the Durbans out of Alvarez and the placing of them in the power of Skinner's men, was the result of a cunningly-laid scheme designed by Foster himself.

He had been with El Espada's men for a number of days; and when it became known to him that Alvarez could no longer hold out, and that the Durbans were in that town, he hit upon a plan which he believed would be of material benefit to him.

He knew he had lost favor in the eyes of Jessie Durban, and he wished to regain his standing. He did not know what had become of Jessup, but sincerely hoped that the fortunes of war would extinguish that gentleman's claims. If he could make Jessie and her father believe that he was a true man who had been badly slandered, and could in some way render them a signal service, he believed he could attain his old place in their estimation.

Naturally they were surprised to discover he was also a prisoner. He related to them a very pitiful story; and the distrust which had been awakened against him in their minds was somewhat dissipated by it.

Of course, his pretense of being held by these men had no foundation in fact. In so holding him, they were merely doing what he had requested them to do. He could have secured his release at any moment by the simple asking.

"Where are these men to take us?" Durban inquired, after a lengthy interchange of experiences and confidences.

"I think they intend to retreat to Carmencita. The insurgents still hold that town; and are massing there, I am told, for a final stand. They will lose Alvarez; but they believe they will be able to hold Carmencita until they can bring the Government to terms."

The conversation was interrupted by the advance movement of El Espada's men; and Durban saw, by the stars, that they were heading in a northerly direction, presumably toward Carmencita.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TOO LATE.

GILES JESSUP had not been wholly unsuccessful in his mission. Within two days after his departure from Alvarez he had collected more than a dozen of as brave men as there were on the border—all Americans and reliable.

Not only had he done that, but he had secured a commission for himself as a captain, from the regular Government. It was in the nature of a roving commission, authorizing him to go where he liked and to do all he could to injure the insurgents.

He did not arrive before Alvarez, however, until that city had capitulated, and the Government troops were preparing to march into it.

He was wild with anxiety concerning the fate of Jessie Durban and her father; and it was a delight to him, therefore, to meet Salmon Pike.

The old man had succeeded in working through the lines, and was now hovering about, awaiting a favorable opportunity for rejoining those he had left in the city.

"An' Joe Dobson is his name!" he cried, advancing with unfeigned delight, and extending to Jessup his hand. "Which it hain't your name; but I'd a heap sight ruther see you!"

Jessup's first inquiry was for the Durbans.

"They're all right!" and Pike expanded his mouth in a pleased grin. "They're a-sailin' o'er the sea—with every rock and snag cleared out o' the channel! An' some o' the rocks were purty big too!"

"Then Durban is safe and sound?"

"Couldn't be safer ner sounder! They come mighty nigh a-shootin' him, though!—an' it was chiefly the work o' that scoundrel, Gervase! His race is run, now!"

The order for the occupation of the city by the troops of the Government had come; and Jessup was anxious to be among the first to enter. He added Pike to his little company, and secured for him a horse.

The old man, even though he had felt so glad to see Jessup, and had talked with him so warmly and confidentially, could not shake off the distrust aroused by many of Jessup's past acts. Again and again the questions recurred to him: Is this man true or false? Is he an honest man or is he the great hypocrite and scoundrel that I have thought?

He did not lose sight of the fact that Jessup might be a very bad man, and still be disposed to aid the Durbans. Jessup's love for Jessie would account for that.

"If I hadn't seen him with my own two eyes, a-settin' in that dug-out an' a-talkin' so sweet to Peel Skinner! But I can't git over that. Honest men don't sneak out into the hills an' talk that way to the captains o' cattle-thieves. No siree; that they don't!"

Nevertheless, even while these thoughts were running through his mind, he was preparing to accompany Jessup into Alvarez.

Jessup could have no knowledge of the old man's secret feelings toward him, and he treated Pike with the greatest kindness and consideration.

Pike was resolved to do nothing that might reveal his suspicious thoughts to Jessup. There was a mystery surrounding the latter that he was determined to solve, if possible; and to do this would require much circumspect watching.

When they dashed into Alvarez, and under the guidance of Salmon Pike sought the residence of William Wentworth, they found they had come too late.

"Oh, if you could only have got in last night!" and Mrs. Wentworth wrung her hands in sorrow.

Wentworth stood by in a helpless sort of a way, his grief almost too great for words.

"They are gone?" Jessup cried, his face visibly paling. "When? Where?"

Bit by bit he drew from them the story of Dominique's raid on the house.

Jessup was white with despair. To be thus beaten, to have the cup of pleasure thus dashed from his lips, was maddening.

Salmon Pike was scarcely less affected. He had conceived for the Durbans a warm and unselfish feeling.

"We will follow them to the end of the earth, if need be!" and Jessup set his teeth sternly.

The old man bent on him a look of searching curiosity. He would have given much, at that moment, to have been able to read Jessup's inmost thoughts. That the young man was keenly disappointed, no one could doubt. But what was the chief ingredient in the cup of his disappointment? That was the question Pike asked himself.

"Have you any idea where they were taken?"

"Not the remotest," was Wentworth's reply.

"Nor can I understand why Dominique should wish to carry them away. He is Durban's bitter enemy, and yours. But surely, he would not do them personal injury!"

"You've plumb ferget the spy bizness!" Pike ejaculated. "He wanted him shot, then; and it hain't likely he's changed his mind on that subject. I don't think he'd reely hurt the girl, though!"

This last was for the benefit of Jessup.

A thorough discussion of Gervase's probable intentions led to the belief that he would flee with his prisoners to Carmencita. The insurgents were gathering a strong force at that point, which was practically the only place still loyal to them. It would offer to Dominique the safest retreat in the province, and it seemed natural he should go there.

His reasons for taking the Durbans were not, however, so apparent. The only thing they could surmise was that he did it to vex Jessup.

"I tell you what!" and Pike took the young man aside for a confidential talk. "Two an' two allus makes four. The on'y trouble is in gittin' your figures together jist right—linin' 'em up, as you may say! If you can jist git the two under the two, it hain't no trouble at all to add 'em. That's what I've been a-tryin' to do; an' I think I've succeeded!"

Jessup looked at him in bewilderment.

"Don't savvy, hey? Well, you'll agree with me that Gervase didn't carry them folks away jist fer fun. That's the first figure. Now I've lined up the other one ag'inst it. I was tol' this mornin' that Coates Foster had jined Skinner's men; an' both o' us know that Gervase belongs there, too! You can help me to add 'em! Two an' two is four. Foster thinks a power o' that girl—er thinks he does; which amounts to the same thing, so far as this little sum in addition is concerned. An' you won't git mad, I reckon, if I say that you do, too. Now, if my figures don't lie, Foster is the man that's got Gervase to do this bit o' rustlin'; an' I don't think you'll need a spy-glass to see why!"

The old man's tone and manner were convincing; and his argument, quaintly stated as it was, was equally so.

"Then, you would go to Carmencita?"

"Edzackly so! I don't allow though, that we can git in there. But sumthin' may turn up that we don't know about now; an' the closer we air to Durban an' his girl, the better it may be for them!"

The advice so coincided with Jessup's wishes that he determined to follow it. And as soon as he could get his small force in readiness, they left Alvarez and bent their course toward Carmencita.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN A CORNER.

PEDRO FRANCISCO was in an uneasy frame of mind as he strode nervously to and fro in his little office near the Plaza. The affairs of the revolutionists were nearing a crisis. Already those high in command began to see the handwriting on the wall predicting their downfall. Carmencita was their last stronghold, and the indications were that they could not hold it many days. Then they would be in the power

they had offended, and would be dealt with as traitors.

Francisco had been one of the first to enroll himself among the insurrectionists. He had been overcome by a mad dream of ambition. He had been led to believe that the rebellion would be more extended. It was promised that the revolt would involve many powerful states, and be so general that success was assured.

After events had shown this to be false.

Instead of the high rewards and honors which he had anticipated, there loomed before him visions of disgrace. The sun-lighted pinnacle to which he had aspired had dissolved like the airy fabric of a vision. It had been unsubstantial and shadowy. It had vanished, and with it all his high hopes.

"I was a fool—an unmitigated, driveling fool for ever joining myself to such a scheme. I might have known it would result in failure. But I was deceived—basely deceived by the men I so firmly trusted!"

There was but one pleasant drop in the bitter draught he was now compelled to swallow. The men who had dragged him down would be compelled to suffer with him. His fate would be theirs.

He turned to an orderly who had crossed the threshold, and stood respectfully saluting.

"What is it?" he snapped. "Don't bother me, unless you have matters of importance to report!"

The alcalde was in an irritable temper, and the frown with which he viewed the man illly became his fat face.

"Senor, the Government troops are receiving re-enforcements. General Camillo desires a conference. He thinks it would be advisable to attack them and scatter them before they have so strengthened their position that it will be impossible."

The frown on Francisco's face deepened. This communication seemed to him to portend the beginning of the end.

"How strong are the re-enforcements?"

"That I do not know, senor. But they are a strong body, consisting of both horse and foot."

"Tell General Camillo I will see him presently."

The orderly saluted and departed, and the alcalde recommenced his impatient striding up and down the room.

"It is useless!" he cried, clasping his hands in a despairing way. "We can not fight against fate. We are certain to be defeated. Why delay the inevitable?"

The alcalde was in a tremor of fear. The outlook could not well look blacker. He saw defeat all too plainly—and beyond that! Ah! he scarcely dared look beyond that.

The town was not yet invested with the Government forces, but additional troops were constantly arriving, and it was but a question of a few hours when it would be, if something was not done to change the course of events.

He knew that Camillo would favor an immediate attack, and would urge it with fiery ardor. Camillo was a warrior, which Francisco was not. Francisco detested the grim array of war, and at heart was an arrant coward, though he had piped so loudly and bravely while danger was still yet in the distance.

He knew that Camillo's suggestion was the only one that could now be made. They must either fight or surrender. Yet, if he threw his influence in favor of fighting, he would be expected to lead the columns; and that was a thing he quailed from.

He was Camillo's superior in rank, and his decision would be final. What should he do? Great drops of sweat stood out on his brow, as he struggled with the perplexing question.

"Why not escape while I can?" he asked himself again and again.

He could leave the place in disguise, while there was still time and opportunity, and make his way safely out of the country. Why not do it? He was a ruined man; but even to a ruined man life may stretch out alluringly.

He resolved to see Camillo, and hear what that general had to say, though even then he could not doubt the nature of it. After that he could determine on his course. Yes, he would see Camillo; it would give him time to think.

As he left the room, he was cheered by a pleasant sight. El Espada and his band had made their way in through the northern gate on the side opposite to the point where the Government troops were collecting. El Espada's men were not numerous, but they were known to be fighters; and in the life and death struggle that was approaching, the insurgents would need every man they could get.

He saw Durban and his daughter in the midst of the band, and rightly guessed why they were there. But it was a matter which did not concern him at that time.

As he appeared in the Plaza, the excited populace sent up a welcoming shout. He returned this greeting with a bow and a smile. He could see by their faces that they were anxious and expectant, and not over confident. Evidently they looked to him as a worthy leader and guide.

He mounted to a prominent place, and as they gathered about him, endeavored to address to

them some words of encouragement, notwithstanding the fact that his own heart was as fear-shaken as that of any there.

As he spoke, the inspiration of his own words gave him courage and a degree of fortitude. The stream of his eloquence carried him on until he almost felt that he was uttering sentences of truth and soberness.

"We shall succeed!" he declared, as he neared the close of his harangue. "We must succeed. There is no hope for us otherwise. We are in a boat upon a shoreless ocean, battling with the whirlwind; and if we are overcome by it, the end is destruction."

"Therefore, citizens of Carmencita, rouse yourselves! Rouse yourselves! The foot of the invader is on our soil. He has come for plunder, and for the purpose of crushing out our liberty. We are battling for our homes and our families! For right and freedom. I say unto you, we must and will succeed!"

His fervid declaration seemed to inspire new hope in the deluded people who heard him. They greeted his rounded periods with applause and exhibitions of pleasure; and when he went his way, they gathered in little groups to discuss the words of wisdom which had fallen from his lips.

Now that the stimulus of an applauding multitude no longer supported him, the alcalde's old fears and indecision returned; and as he entered the room where he expected to meet Camillo, he could not for the life of him prevent the paleness of his face from betraying in a measure his secret thoughts.

As he had expected, Camillo was in favor of an instant marshaling of the entire available force of the insurgents, for the purpose of an immediate attack. This Camillo had a strongly-marked and aggressive face, and was a soldier born to command. It was an unfortunate thing for Carmencita that the cowardly alcalde had been made his superior.

Francisco beat down his argument with counter-statements, and succeeded in inducing a postponement of the fight. This he did by claiming that their garrison would be strongly re-enforced within a few hours, when they could compel a conflict with better show of success.

He willfully overlooked the fact that delay would also add to the force of the opposition.

Camillo was not convinced, but he had to submit, and he did it with as good a grace as the circumstances rendered possible—and the time for striking passed without a blow being delivered.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A POWERFUL ARGUMENT.

"If you think it's the best thing to do?"

Night was at hand, and Giles Jessup and Salmon Pike, seated on their ponies, were looking across the intervening table-land to where the lights of Carmencita twinkled, and the camp-fires of the soldiers gleamed redly. The delay occasioned by Francisco had been fatal to the hopes of that city. The Government troops had received large additions, and the place was now as closely invested as Alvarez had been but a short time before.

These troops, too, were flushed with recent victory, and thereby rendered the more invincible.

Jessup had hoped to arrive with his men before the siege was fairly on; and by some hook or crook, make his way into the town, and rescue the Durban from the power of El Espada.

There could be no doubt now that El Espada had retreated to Carmencita, and that the Durban were with him as prisoners. Inquiries along the line of his flight had revealed that fact to a certainty. But Jessup had not reached the vicinity of the town in time to accomplish his wishes.

What to do now, was the subject he and Pike were discussing.

"It's the only thing that'll work," the old man made answer, with his usual drawl. "It's plain that you can't take your men in there; an' onc't inside, I believe I could do better work nor you!"

The arguments which Pike had advanced, satisfied Jessup, but they did not ease his mind. He wanted to enter Carmencita; and this wish was the outgrowth of his strong desire to be near Jessie Durban and to protect her from the dangers with which she was surrounded.

Many days had passed since he had seen her. She was at her father's ranch-house beyond the river at that time, and neither dreamed of the exciting adventures and perils through which they would shortly be called to pass.

And he could not forget that she had penetrated into these dangers in his behalf.

Pike had closely watched Jessup throughout the long journey to Carmencita, his sleepless suspicion never for a moment at rest. He could not fathom the mystery which clung about this young man; and its study, therefore, became a sort of fascination. He was compelled to admit that all of Jessup's recent acts were unexceptionable. But that could not blot out the memory of past events.

Jessup had stated to him his wish to enter

Carmencita alone, and the old man had strongly inveighed against it. He believed he could make the trip with better chances of success; and said so. He still wore the insurgent uniform given him by Wentworth, and this would materially aid him should he make the attempt.

Jessup gave way to Pike, much against his will, though knowing it was for the best.

The hour was yet too early for the effort which Pike contemplated and so they moved up to the forces of the Government, and there went into camp.

It was plain that Carmencita could not long hold out against the forces arrayed about it. The insurgents could gain no assistance, or but little, from the outside. Their forces had everywhere been defeated and scattered.

Pike would have no difficulty in making his way to the insurgent line of sentinels; and when he was ready, Jessup accompanied him as far as it was deemed advisable.

Then, when the old man had slipped away into the gloom, he sat on a mound of earth and stared at the lights that shone beyond, and speculated as to the probable fate of Durban and his charming daughter.

Jessup's heart was not with the men camped about him. It was in Carmencita with the woman he loved. He had never expressed to her his affection, but he resolved that should chance ever again give him the opportunity he would not squander it. The fact that, when she deemed him in danger from the River Rustlers, she she had ventured forth in his behalf, was a most encouraging recollection.

As for Salmon Pike, this slipping from place to place in an eel-like way was a thing he was much accustomed to. Few men could make their way through dangers as skillfully as could he; and he encountered very little trouble in penetrating the insurgent lines and entering the town.

The greatest difficulty came when he had gained the streets of Carmencita. He did not know where to go, nor of whom to inquire; and he dared not reveal himself to any one about him.

He could readily discern that the people, both soldiers and civilians, were much perturbed over the state in which they found themselves. They knew of the fall of Alvarez, and anticipated a similar fate for their own city.

The fact that Camillo had urged a fight earlier in the day, when the chances of accomplishing something were so much better, had somehow become noised abroad. And it was known, too, greatly to the injury of that gentleman's reputation, that it was Pedro Francisco who had prevented the attack.

Bitter curses were now being heaped on Francisco's head, and there were many who did not hesitate to roundly denounce him as a coward and a braggart.

Francisco had been made aware of the changed feelings of the people, and had discreetly retired to his little room near the Plaza. And there, alone with his communings, he had abundant time to repent the fatal day he had entered into conspiracy and rebellion.

All these things Salmon Pike gathered, or guessed at, as he made his way in a circumspect manner through the narrow streets of the place.

Nowhere, however, could he find a trace of El Espada's men. It was too much like the proverbial hunt for a needle in a haystack. There were soldiers everywhere, not to be told by outward appearance from the River Rustlers; and he dared not be over-bold in his search. The darkness, too, while it shielded him, hampered his movements. The town was lighted, it is true, but that scarcely assisted him in his efforts.

Finding he could accomplish nothing that way, he resolved on a somewhat desperate movement. He knew the position of the alcalde's office near the Plaza; and, thinking it likely he would find the alcalde there, made his way by slow degrees to that point.

Fortunately the Plaza was almost deserted; and his garb kept any one from giving him especial attention.

He pushed the door open, and made his way in without invitation.

He found Francisco pacing up and down the room in that nervous, restless way, muttering unintelligible sentences.

The alcalde was so absorbed in his unpleasant reflections that he did not know that another was in the room, until Pike gave a slight cough for the purpose of arousing him.

Then he looked up and saw the little old man leaning easily against the wall near the door and holding the big horse-pistol in a threatening attitude.

Through all his adventures, Salmon Pike had clung to that rusty and ancient weapon with singular pertinacity.

The sight was not calculated to soothe Francisco's nerves. Even under the soldier garb he recognized Pike; and could not fail to recall that other time when he had looked into the same menacing muzzle.

He would have cried out, knowing that bodies of insurgent troops were not far away, but that his great fear kept him quiet.

"It's a reel purty thing to look at," Pike declared, referring to the pistol. "Most like meet-in' old friends, I reckon, fer you to see it ag'in. 'Twas a lovely time we had that night, fer a fac'. I don't think I ever see a lovelier. An' you're glad to have me visit you, o' course! You look worried!"

Francisco glared at him as if he could have slain him with the best grace possible.

"What is it you want?" he hoarsely inquired.

"Is that the way to talk to an old friend? Specially when he's been gone so long? Alcalde, I'm ashamed o' you!"

"Will you tell me what you want?" thrilled by a nameless fear, for Francisco was in a very shaky mood that night. "Tell me what you want—and then leave me!"

"I'm a-huntin' fer some mutual frien's o' ourn. They're hyer in the city, but I'll be hanged if I can find 'em; an' I can't put my han's on a directory neither. If I could, I wouldn't have bothered you—seein' as how you don't seem pleased with my company."

"Will you leave me alone?" Francisco urged. Then, with a show of spirit: "If you don't, I shall call for assistance!"

Pike's little eyes twinkled merrily.

"Pardner, I wisht you would. But I don't think it would be advisable, fer you. Two's company, and three's a crowd. You an' me will get along a good deal better without any outside help. That's my opinion; but you can holler if you want to! You don't reely want to, now pardner, do you? I reckon you was jist a-jokin' about that! Tell me you was jist a-jokin', an' I'll fergive you!"

Francisco's terror was so great that his face had changed to a dirty yellow hue. He trembled so that he could scarcely stand.

Pike seemed to enjoy this exhibition of craven fear, for a look of delight lit up his wrinkled countenance.

"I'm glad you're enjoyin' yourself, pardner! An' as fer me, I don't reely think I ever had a nicer visit. But this hain't a-gittin' down to bizness. I'd like to stay with you longer, but I'm jist bound to look up them other frien's o' mine. I'm afeard they're a-pinin' fer me!"

"Who are they?"

"El Espada an' his River Rustlers."

Francisco stared at him bewilderedly.

"No, I hain't crazy! El Espada has my frien's with him. You know 'em, I reckon. Their names air Durban?"

"I don't know where they are!" with an attempt at bravado.

"Oh, yes you do. Give me their number and street, an' I'll say good-night to you."

A look, which did not pass unnoticed by Pike, came into Francisco's eyes.

"You will find El Espada's men camped in a side street near the northern gates."

"An' when I start fer that p'int, then you'll call out to the guards an' have me arrested. That's a cute idee that's crep' into your cranium, pardner; but it won't work."

He advanced upon the cowering alcalde and thrust the pistol almost into the rascal's face.

"I'm a-goin' to tie you, pardner. I'm sorry but I have to; but weepin' don't change the circumstances."

Before Francisco was aware of Pike's intentions, the little man had drawn a bit of looped cord from a pocket. With a deft fling he tossed this over Francisco's wrists.

If the alcalde had had a spark of courage left, he would have resisted and made some outcries, even if he felt that his life would be thereby endangered. But his spirit was completely crushed, not wholly by Pike's threatenings, but by the perils hourly thickening around him.

"You will not injure me?" he pleaded.

"Nuthin' o' the kind! I'm jist a-goin' to keep you from runnin' to the newspapers with an account o' the pleasant visit I've been payin' you."

As Francisco made no resistance whatever, submitting as docilely as a lamb, it required but a few moments and very little trouble for Pike to bind him securely.

Put when Pike produced a gag and attempted to apply it, he strove to utter a protest.

"It is kind of a mean trick, pardner; an' it makes me 'most ashamed o' myself. But you're too important a man to stay here alone without callers. Somebody'll find you and let you go. Then you can tell 'em that this was the work o' burglars."

"You won't tell 'em that?" as he saw the evil light in the bound man's eyes. "Well, lemme give you a little advice on that point. If you make any row about this, or do anything to injure the Durban, you'll live long enough to wish you hadn't. You know an' I know that this town can't hold out very long. When it falls, my friends will be on top; an', pardner, I warn you—I warn you that if you make any foolish breaks about this hyer bizness, you'll be shot as soon as the town is taken!"

With this stern warning, having secured the alcalde to his satisfaction, he retreated as silently as he had come.

He experienced no difficulty in finding El Espada's men, now that he knew where to look. He did not know how he would manage to approach the Durban. Fortunately he found they were housed with Coates Foster in an

adobe building near the camp of the outlaws insurgents.

No strict watch was kept on this building, as it was not thought the prisoners would make any attempt to escape, knowing they could not leave the town.

Into this building Pike penetrated, shielded by the darkness and his insurgent uniform.

A faint light was burning, sufficient to reveal the interior; and he placed a finger warningly to his lips as he saw before him Sylvester and Jessie Durban, and Coates Foster.

Foster was still playing his game of deceit; and had played it so cunningly that he had largely regained the favor of the father and daughter.

By thus seeing with his own eyes that the Durban were safe and well, Pike had largely accomplished his mission. He wished to assure them, however, of the lively interest Jessup was taking in their behalf, and how he had made his appearance there at Jessup's command.

This he did in as few words as possible; and it delighted his soul to see the grateful look on the faces of Jessie and Sylvester Durban.

Foster greeted him only with black looks.

"Looks hain't musket-balls, my pood friend!" he ejaculated, revealing with startling suddenness Foster's manner and attitude.

"I tied up a friend o' yours jist a while ago, an' if you try to make any break I'll serve you the same. That's whatever! I hain't got no time to fool with you, Mr. Foster; an' I hope you'll understand me without many words!"

Then he repeated to Foster the threats with which he had cowed Pedro Francisco; after which he retreated from the building—stating, as he turned to go, that the town would capitulate on the morrow, when he would see them again.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN BATTLE ARRAY.

CARMENCITA did not surrender so readily as Salmon Pike and many others had anticipated and predicted. A strong insurgent force came up from the south in the early hours of the morning, and at day-dawn attacked the Government troops with incredible fury.

Gaining knowledge of this, the little army inclosed in Carmencita sallied out and pushed the fighting from the opposite side.

Francisco had been found tied in his office not long after Pike's departure from it. The one who thus found and released him was Camillo.

A wordy war ensued between the two almost as soon as Francisco was free to speak. Camillo, driven half frantic by the delays imposed by the alcalde, lost his temper and taunted his chief with his lack of courage.

This pricked Francisco's pride and stung him to a point of desperation. To be insulted by an inferior was a thing he could not endure. And yet he could do nothing. To make the matter public would be to reveal to the gaze of the people the many petty acts of cowardice of which he had been guilty.

"Dare you order a sortie?" Camillo asked with a sneer, as the rattling musketry of the attacking party came to them in the gray of the early morning. "Of course you would not lead it. That is not to be expected. But dare you order it, that other men may do the fighting?"

"Ay! I dare!" Francisco avowed, not able to withstand these bitter taunts. "And I dare lead it Camillo! Can you say more?"

And now, at Camillo's side and surrounded by a brilliant staff, Francisco was advancing to the aid of his brethren from the south. His face was ghastly, showing with what perturbation he remained at his post; but there was also a light in his eyes which revealed a determination to remove from his name the stigma that had recently attached to it.

Coates Foster was with El Espada's men, marching not far behind the generals and their staffs. He had not thrown off his disguise, so far as the Durban were concerned, though he felt that Pike's words had injured him in that quarter.

They did not know, however, that he had joined himself to Skinner's men. Before the order had come for the sortie, he had had himself conveyed, as a prisoner, to another building. And this he had done because he was tired of the confinement imposed on him by the working out of his plan. He believed that this change could be effected, and he be restored to his liberty, without opening the eyes of the Durban to his true position there.

El Espada's men had hailed the coming of a fight with the eagerness with which a desert lion scents prey. The inaction of the siege was extremely distasteful to men of their roving disposition.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to describe the battle between the insurgents and the forces of the Government, except so far as its incidents are connected with the characters of this story. War is an unpleasant thing to dwell upon, though most of the great names of history have been those of warriors, and much that passes as history is but a narration of bloody and barbarous conflicts. The discussion of the question of whether war is or is not a necessity, or has been

a benefit in the advancement of the race, has no place here.

The fight before the walls of Carmencita was similar in its general characteristics to many occurring before and since. It was a horly contested engagement, and was not lacking in stirring and dramatic incidents common at such times.

The little band of men under Giles Jessup took a part on the side of the Government, as a matter of course. Pike had returned to them, and bore himself with his customary coolness and heroism.

But it was reserved for Jessup to enact a part deserving of special mention.

The chances of battle opposed his company to a portion of the River Rustlers led by Coates Foster.

When Jessup saw this man, a sudden fury seemed to seize him. The memories of the past overwhelmed him like a tide. In imagination he saw Foster's cruel, sneering face framed amid the mesquite, heard the whistling lash of the stock-whip as it was wielded by the muscular arm of the Mexican cowboy, and felt again the keen sting of the blows and the gushing of the warm blood. Ay! and he felt the bitter shame and dishonor of it all as only a proud-spirited man can.

With an inarticulate cry of fury he spurred his horse toward Foster's, determined to settle with him then and there for all the cruel wrongs that had been done him.

"Guard yourself!" he shouted, as he lifted his saber and aimed at Foster a furious blow.

Foster, however, was not taken unawares.

He had seen Jessup, and was as eager for a personal combat as was the ranch foreman. He believed himself the superior of Jessup in such a contest, and was therefore not unwilling to court it. If by a lucky stroke he could rid himself of this hated rival for the hand of Jessie Durban, the victory would be one fraught with great consequences.

He parried Jessup's well-aimed blow, and wheeling his horse sought to ride his rival down. This he was unable to accomplish, although his steed was obedient and well trained.

As Jessup passed him again after the two had circled about each other like Indian combatants seeking an advantage, Foster delivered a stroke, which if it had reached its mark would have cloven his head. Jessup caught it, however, with his own weapon, and by a dexterous twist wrenched the saber from Foster's hand.

The tide of battle had flowed by them and left them struggling alone on the plain. Of this, though, they were not aware, being so absorbed in this personal encounter.

Salmon Pike, too, watchful as he usually was, had passed by without heeding them, intent only on the things ahead.

The charge made by the Government troops had been a desperate and exciting one; and it is little to be wondered, therefore, that the fight between Jessup and Foster had gone practically unnoticed.

Foster wrenched aside his horse, as the saber left his hand; and drawing a pistol, attempted to shoot his foe. The weapon missed fire; and in his great rage he hurled it at Jessup. The latter dodged it.

Foster was now in his power.

The villain realized this and tried to spur away. This effort on his part came near resulting fatally to him. He jerked his horse around so quickly that it was thrown from its feet; and Foster, falling half beneath it, found himself pinioned to the earth.

Jessup's eyes were blazing with a fury that bordered on insanity. Seeing his enemy thus prostrate, he leaped from the saddle and rushed upon him with uplifted saber.

There can be little doubt that Foster believed the moment of his death was at hand. The look of horror that came into his eyes was awful to behold. He threw up his hands and cried out appealingly.

A revolution of feeling seemed to shake Jessup in that instant of triumph. He stopped as if in indecision, and the threatening saber came slowly down.

"I ought to kill you!" he hissed, glaring into the eyes of the terrified man before him.

"Oh, spare my life! Please spare my life!" Foster cried, writhing in agony.

The animal was somewhat injured by its fall, but at this moment it struggled to its feet, releasing Foster from the weight of its body. But he did not essay to rise. He only cowered there, repeating his appeals for mercy.

"Mercy!" and Jessup's intonation was withering in its contempt. "Did you show me mercy? You deserve to die the death of a dog! But I will not kill you. That would be to belittle myself. I have always made it a rule never to strike a man when he is down!"

"But there is your sword. Get up and take it, and face me again. Dare you do it?"

Foster only groveled the more.

"Lie there, then! You are my prisoner, and I shall deliver you up as such."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A TIME OF EXCITEMENT.

JESSUP did not get to carry out his intention with regard to Foster. The tide of battle flowed

back over the spot where they had been so lately contending, and they were caught up and borne along with it, and thereby separated.

Within a few moments the insurgent forces were in full retreat. For them the day had ended in defeat. They were scattered everywhere, flying wildly before their enemies, and seeking vainly for refuge within the walls of the town.

Jessup had remounted, and was riding hurriedly along, looking for a familiar form, when his glance fell on Salmon Pike.

The old man was excellently mounted; and as he drew nearer, Jessup saw that his furrowed face was aflame with excitement.

Seeing Jessup, Pike rode straight toward him, wildly shouting as he came:

"The Ole Boy hisself is turned loose, an' is just a-humpin' things!"

"What is the matter?" Jessup anxiously asked.

"Matter enough fer one day! Peel Skinner is killed, an' the River Rustlers, under Dominique, have carried away Jessie an' the ole man! Enough fer one day—an' a good deal to slop over into another!"

To Jessup, the information was of the most startling character. With the defeat of the insurgents, he had felt that these friends would be safe. Carmencita was in the hands of the Government; but that fact, agreeable as it was, could not palliate the distress occasioned by this new discovery.

"I seen 'em jist a minute ago, a-ridin' like all creation fer the south," the old man panted, referring to Durban and his daughter and their captors. "I don't reckon we can overtake 'em, ner do anything if we should, but we can try. 'Tain't no use to try to git troops to help us. There hain't time; and we jist couldn't git 'em now, if we wanted to!"

There was another who knew of the carrying away of Durban and Jessie by Dominique Gervase, and that was Coates Foster. He had regained his horse in the rush, and, seeing Gervase ride by with his men surrounding the Durban, he knew by intuition what was occurring, and spurred after them.

But he lost them in a little while by reason of intervening earthworks and hurrying bodies of men. He had noticed the general direction taken, however, and kept on, hoping to come up with them by and by.

He did not succeed in this; and knowing it was useless to attempt to trail them, he resorted to reasoning to help him out.

The leniency extended to him by Jessup had not in the least lessened his hatred. In truth, it had rather increased it. It is not in the nature of such men to be grateful for such a favor. He naturally rejoiced that his life had been spared; but to be forced to receive it at Jessup's hands was gall and wormwood. That he would never treat so great an enemy in that way was as certain as the shining of the sun.

The bit of reasoning to which he gave himself convinced him that Dominique Gervase and the River Rustlers had headed for their secret hiding-place in the hills. He had been with them there; hence, knew its exact location. By taking a more direct route than they seemed to be pursuing he believed it possible for him to get there first.

Two or three times he experienced some difficulty in avoiding the bodies of soldiers scattered over the country.

He had a long and hard ride before him, and did not reach the vicinity of the bandit retreat until after nightfall.

To his surprise, he found that the outlaws were already there, and that they had posted sentinels. They doubtless had a well-grounded fear that they might be followed.

Foster, feeling that he was in reality one of their number, advanced boldly; and when the guard hailed, he answered by giving his name. This he did, however, in a low tone, that it might not reach the prisoners.

"Tell Gervase that I want to see him," sliding from his horse.

"But I have no right to leave my post here!" the guard objected.

"That's all right! I'll stand responsible for the damage. It's a matter of some importance."

The sentinel moved away as if not thoroughly convinced of the propriety of so doing; and in a few moments Dominique Gervase made his appearance.

Foster and Gervase were far from being friends, but the wily Mexican managed to conceal his hatred under an outward show of cordiality and deference.

Foster hastily told how he had ridden from Carmencita, and his prime object in following the party.

"You know I was held as a captive—or rather a pretended captive—by El Espada, and that Durban and his daughter were thoroughly convinced that I was what I seemed. I want to keep up that deception. It can be of no consequence to you, and will aid me greatly in my plans. I want you to pretend to capture me near here and carry me into camp. Will you do it?"

Foster did not see the dark look that glistened for a moment in Dominique's eyes. Perhaps it was well for his peace of mind that the gloom

hid it. The Mexican understood the depth and cunning of his plans. They did not please him, either. But the time had not come for him to show his displeasure.

"You can do better than that," he said, looking a way as he spoke. "You want to make it appear that you came to rescue them?"

"Yes!"

"Then, why not carry it a little further? They are held in a small cave just beyond the camp. You can slip in to them and try to help them away; and just as you are about to do it, my men will discover you and nip the thing in the bud."

This was a decided improvement on the plan which Foster had outlined, and he acceded to it with great eagerness; and as soon as the details had been arranged, Dominique retired.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A VILLAIN'S RUSE.

FOR a lover who was to rescue his sweetheart and her father, Coates Foster went about his work in a very deliberate way. He retreated a short distance, and tied his horse to some bushes. He then returned, boldly passed the guard, and without much attempt at concealment, quickly circled the camp.

Dominique had informed him of the exact location of the little cave; and when he drew near it, he got down on his hands and knees and made some show of a stealthy approach.

Many of the men knew of his presence, having been informed by Dominique, that they might not fire on him as an intruder; and but for the baseness of the deception, his ruse would have seemed a broad farce.

The hour was yet comparatively early, and Durban and his daughter had not yet retired. They were sitting just within the cave's entrance, discussing their unhappy situation, and weighing the chance of release. The prospect was anything but bright; and Jessie had been bitterly bewailing her folly in setting foot on Mexican soil without her father's advice and permission.

"Hist!"

They started as the low sound reached them, and Durban half-rose from his recumbent posture.

The sibilant noise came again; and was followed by the appearance of the head and shoulders of a man.

"Who is it?" Durban inquired, bending forward.

"It is I, Coates Foster."

He crawled on again as he made the statement.

Durban instinctively advanced toward him, and Jessie sprung up, wild-eyed and panting.

Foster got up from his crouching position when he had gained the security of the shadows.

"I have come to get you out of here!" he declared, passing a handkerchief across his forehead as if to wipe away the perspiration. "My! but I've had a time of it. But everything has gone swimmingly so far. If you can only pass the guards as I did! You are not tied?"

"Not at all!" Durban assured him, holding out his unbound hands. "There was no need for the rascals to tie us. The camp lies in front, and the hills behind are unscalable. We should not have thought it possible for any one to pass the sentinels without discovery."

The conversation had been carried on in a low whisper, and the tremor in Durban's voice showed how strongly he was affected by this prospect of liberty. No one but a hardened wretch could have cruelly deceived so confiding a nature.

"It wasn't the easiest thing in the world," Foster averred. "But I fancy I worked it pretty well. If only we can have as good luck in getting out!"

"How did you know we were here, Mr. Foster?" Jessie inquired, tremblingly hastening her simple preparations for departure. "This is such a wilderness of a place, and everything was in such a state of confusion when we were carried away, that I feared we could never be followed."

It was just the opportunity Foster wanted. It gave him a chance to display before her all the pretended risks he had run in her behalf. And with glib tongue he reeled out his concocted story.

Jessie had learned to dislike Foster, but she could not be insensible to merits such as these. She was bound to respect him for his courage and gallantry, and to acknowledge the great obligations he had placed them under.

This she did with peculiar feminine tact; and Coates Foster, as he listened to her words, was thrilled with an indefinable pleasure.

Only a few minutes were spent in getting ready; and then, with Foster in the lead, they crept out of the little cavern, and directed their course toward the eastern side of the camp.

They had proceeded but a few feet, however, when a yell from the outlaws announced their discovery.

"We must run for it!" Foster whispered, taking the girl's hand and darting away.

Durban followed as rapidly as he could.

They took no more than a dozen steps when they ran plump against a body of men gathered there to intercept them.

Almost in a moment they were surrounded, and further flight rendered impossible.

The revulsion of feeling was too great for Sylvester Durban. His long-deferred hopes had been raised to the breaking point; and now, with a wild cry, he fell to the ground senseless.

With a wail Jessie threw herself on the prostrate form of her father.

"Stand back, you dogs!" she cried, raising herself to a half-upright position, and glaring defiantly and with burning eyes at the men swarming about them. "Stand back! You have killed him! Oh, my father! My father!"

She turned from them, and clasping Durban about the neck wildly bemoaned her supposed bereavement. But there were no tears in her eyes. Her grief had penetrated too deep for tears.

Without apparently noticing the clamorous outlaws, Coates Foster knelt at her side and strove to reassure and comfort her. He did not believe Durban was dead, and said so.

In this he was proven a true prophet; for in a very short time Durban moved, and with a low groan came back to semi-consciousness.

Dominique Gervase had watched Foster's actions with a good deal of interest and curiosity; and he was forced to mentally compliment the rascal on his ability in that line.

As soon as it was known that Durban had only fallen in a faint, he was lifted by some of the outlaws and borne to the center of the camp. Here a plentiful application of cold water quickly restored him.

But even though he had returned to life and intelligence, he seemed more broken than before. There was in his face a haggard, hopeless, pathetic look that was pitiful to see. This Jessie could not fail to notice, and her pent feelings found partial relief in tears.

At Gervase's order the three—the two actual prisoners and the pretended one—were placed in the cave from which they had so lately crept.

Durban sunk at once into a state of apathy, from which he did not arouse throughout the night.

"It's too bad!" Foster asserted, sinking to a seat at Jessie's side, and staring out at the camp which had returned to its former state of repose. "I am afraid my well-meant efforts have got you into even worse trouble."

The words were accompanied by a sigh with which he meant to impress on her the genuineness of his sympathy.

"You are not to blame for it!" in a tone of extreme kindness.

She had no thought that his efforts had been but a mere pretense, and that he had worked with the most unworthy motives.

"I'm sorry that I ever came here! But the chances seemed so flattering. I thought that inasmuch as I had successfully passed the guards we could do the same. But we failed; and the failure is having a woful effect upon your father!"

Again she assured him he was not blamable, and tendered him her sincere thanks.

"You are not to blame; and your situation is as bad as ours!"

"You must not forget that it is some pleasure to be near you!" he purred, attempting to take one of her hands in his. "It is true, Jessie, that I failed; but I did all I could; and I did it for your sake!"

She attempted to draw her hand away, sure that he desired to speak words she did not wish to hear.

He retained it, however, and went on, with a sudden, passionate outburst:

"I ran those risks for you, Jessie; and yet you do not care to listen to me. I should not have taken such dangers upon myself for every woman. You know why I did it, Jessie! It was because I love you! Love you better than I do my own life!"

In this Foster spoke the truth—or as near as he was able to do such a thing. His love for Jessie Durban was at times an overmastering passion. But he did not care for her as he did for his life. His make-up was entirely too selfish for that. If he had so regarded her he would never have so grossly deceived her.

"Please do not speak to me in that manner!" she pleaded, releasing her hand by a violent effort. "This is neither the time nor the place. I am conscious of what you have risked for me and my father, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But I must ask that you do not speak to me in this way. At least not now!"

Any man with the instincts of a gentleman would have spared her, after that. But Foster had not the instincts of a gentleman. And so he continued to pour into her unwilling ears the story of his love, and to urge her to look with favor on his suit.

Jessie Durban did not bear the infliction without many protests; and when Coates Foster ended, he had only the poor satisfaction of finding himself most positively rejected by this woman.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WENTWORTH'S NEED.

THE next morning it was known to Dominique Gervase that Giles Jessup, with a force of men, was not many miles away. The knowledge threw Coates Foster into a panic, although he was so situated that he dare not by word or action reveal his fright. He felt sure that Jessup was following on his trail or that of the outlaws, and that should he fall into his hands, his villainy would be exposed and he be punished for his misdeeds.

Gervase was not at all anxious for an encounter with Jessup's men, and he accordingly adopted an expedient for leading them astray.

At that time, Jessup was somewhat at sea. He had come thus far, guided largely by Salmon Pike's statement of the general direction taken by Gervase and his party when carrying away the Durbans. He had found it impossible to pick up Gervase's trail; and even if he could have done so, to follow it would have been almost out of the question, for the trails of bodies of troopers led almost everywhere.

Oppressed by a feeling of uncertainty, he had mounted to the top of a rise, and was scanning the country before him.

His eyes rested on the rugged hills wherein Gervase had sought shelter. He knew that somewhere in those fastnesses Jessie Durban and her father were held as prisoners by the Mexican who had become chief of the River Rustlers on the death of El Espada.

He was about to turn away, unsatisfied and with a heavy heart.

He started however and looked again. Not at the hills this time, but at the valley that lay between. A group of horsemen had ridden from a bunch of timber, and were coming that way.

"If I only had a glass!" he ejaculated, straining his eyes until they ached. "Surely, there are no soldiers in this section. It must be Gervase's men. And they do not know we are here."

Gervase had sent out a portion of his band, thinking that enough to accomplish his purpose and deeming it unwise to send more.

After a time Jessup was able to satisfy himself that what he saw was really a band of the River Rustlers; and when he did so, he beat a hasty retreat.

"We will not reveal ourselves," he said when addressing his followers. "They do not know we are here; and it must be our endeavor to keep them within sight; and to follow them. By doing so we can trace them home."

To every man the prospect appeared to have suddenly brightened. A little while before they knew not which way to turn their steps. It seemed to them almost providential that these men should thus come into sight at that time.

Horses and arms were quickly got in readiness. If they were discovered, a lively brush might take place.

The River Rustlers passed within less than half a mile of the point where Jessup's men had gone into concealment; and though they knew that the latter were somewhere near, they gave no signs that would betray this knowledge.

When they had passed on, Jessup sent some of his most cautious men to the front, and followed with the others at a more leisurely pace.

All that day they had pursued these men; and when night came they found themselves much further from the hills than when they had commenced the chase.

This created in Jessup a feeling of uneasiness, which was not dissipated by a close view he obtained that night of the Rustlers' camp.

Under the friendly shelter of darkness he crept to within a stone's throw of the point where the bandits were lying. He satisfied himself that only a portion of the River Rustlers were there and that the Durbans were not with them; and then crawled away as he had come.

His own camp had been pitched more than a mile back on the trail. Spies were sent forward, however, for the purpose of reporting any movement on the part of the outlaws.

"I don't like the looks of this!" Jessup muttered, as he tossed restlessly that night, unable to sleep. "The band has split in two and the other half of it holds the prisoners. If I only knew where that other half is I should know what to do."

He was fearful that he was being led astray, though he had no idea that the bandits knew of the presence of his party and were purposely drawing him on. The direction they were now taking lay toward Alvarez. Near this point, as Jessup was aware, the insurgents were endeavoring to rally for a final stand; and, as he thought the matter over, it seemed to him probable that these men were marching there to rejoin the rebel troops.

All through the night he studied over the puzzle presented by the incomplete facts known to him, and when morning came he was no nearer a correct solution.

The bandits moved on at daybreak; and throughout that day the pursuit was kept up in the same manner as the day before. When

night approached again, they were close to Alvarez; and here the small body of River Rustlers became absorbed in a much larger force of insurgents.

Jessup's chase was at an end, and it brought him nothing.

It was of great and lasting benefit, though to certain friends, who were in sore need.

These were the Wentworths.

William Wentworth and his estimable wife had remained in Alvarez after that city had surrendered to the Government. But life had not been pleasant for them there. It had been far otherwise. Wentworth, by his neutrality, had offended both the Government and the insurgent forces. Each regarded him with distrust, thinking him friendly with the other; and when he remained in Alvarez, some of the Government officers gathered a belief that he was an insurgent spy, who had staid there for the sole purpose of sending word of their movements to their enemies.

Hence, it came about that he was harassed and tormented until life there became unendurable. As the way was open for him to leave, he at last decided to abandon his temporary home in that city and to make his way northward in the hope of being able to cross into American territory.

In company with his wife, he set out in the night. They were mounted on two miserable little ponies—ponies that had been half starved through the siege and had not yet recovered from their ill-treatment. Miserable beasts as they were, they cost him a good round sum of money.

When it was discovered that they meant to depart from Alvarez, they were delayed by an inquisition of officers until nearly morning. And, as if their cup of sorrow were not already full, when some five miles from the town, one of the ponies shied so violently that Wentworth was pitched from its back and badly injured.

It was at an isolated spot, with no help near, and here Mrs. Wentworth had watched and tended him throughout all the hours of the day, fearing to leave him for the purpose of procuring aid.

Here Giles Jessup, while prowling around the insurgents in search of information, came upon them.

He had his men with him; and out of his supplies was able to furnish the medicine and nourishment that Wentworth so sorely needed. Wentworth's injuries were confined to his shoulders and head; but to Jessup's experienced eye it was evident that it would be many days before he would again be able for duty. As soon as he was made comfortable, Jessup left him and sought of Mrs. Wentworth information concerning affairs in Alvarez. It had suddenly occurred to him as a possibility that Sylvester and Jessie Durban might be in that town.

On this point Mrs. Wentworth was positive.

"I am sure they are not there. Even if they were held as prisoners, they would have managed in some way to send us word of their presence there. Then, it is not at all likely that the Government would desire to hold them."

Wentworth was so much recovered through the night that he was able to hold a long conversation with Jessup. Jessup had not the time, and did not think it advisable, to try to force their way toward the north; and at Wentworth's request, he therefore consented to convey that gentleman and his wife to their mining property in the mountains.

In all likelihood some of the working force of the mine were still there, Wentworth thought, and he could be cared for and protected by them.

There seemed nothing for Jessup to do near Alvarez; and he and his men undertook this escort duty.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HIS KNEE IN SUPPLIANCE BENT.

"HULLO there!"

Salmon Pike craned his head in a listening attitude, as the words came to him.

He had been one of Jessup's party, and was now seated on a bit of adobe wall near the shaft of Wentworth's mine. They had arrived there but a few hours before. Back of him were the mine buildings, which, until their arrival, had been deserted. In them Jessup's force was now domiciled.

The call did not come from any of these buildings, but from a bit of chaparral scrub some distance away. Over this scrub, as he looked, he saw the head of a man uplifted.

"Hello yourself!" he shouted back, when satisfied he was not in any personal danger. "I hain't no blamed tellyphone. What do you want? Come out and show yourself!"

In response to this gruff invitation, Pedro Francisco stepped into view, much to Pike's astonishment. He had thought the face that of a Mexican, but had never dreamed that it might be that of the alcalde of Carmencita.

Francisco was not the man he had been. The vaunting, self-important air had vanished. His glittering uniform was gone, with all its showy medals, stars and tinsel. His clothing was dilap-

idated and dirty, and his appearance was woe-begone in the extreme.

An uncontrollable fit of laughter came upon the lips of the little man as he looked down on the crest-fallen alcalde.

"Hain't a-tryin' to make a skeer-crow out'n yerself, now, be ye? Land alive! you look like one! What have you done with all them gold dollars you used to wear on yer buzzum? Pawned 'em? I knowed a feller down in Eelino' onc't, that had a gold watch what he put up with his 'uncle,' an' he never got it back, nutber!"

Francisco was in no mood for joking. He felt degraded, and it humiliated him to appear in this guise even before Salmon Pike—a man who could by no stretch of imagination be called a dude.

Since the fall of Carmencita, matters had gone hard with Francisco. He had fled from that city in the night to escape the doom he felt awaited him, and had ever since been a wanderer on the face of the earth. He had hidden in canyons and caves, had shunned the faces of his fellow-men, and altogether had led a most miserable existence. More than half the time he could not procure sufficient food; and on a man of his previous habits, this abstinence told sorely. His clothing hung loosely on his shrunken form as he shambled forward.

"Can I see Giles Jessup?" he inquired, not heeding the questions Pike had hurled at him.

There was a piteous appeal in the tones.

"I reckon you can, ole hoss-pistil!" Pike made answer, surveying Francisco with marked curiosity. "He's jist got home, an' he'll be happy to meet you. The same hyer! I hain't fergot the last time we chinned away at each other in the little town down yender. 'Twas a scrumptious time we had, fer a fac'. I held a full hand then—six aces. A thunderin' queer hand, wa'n't it?"

As if to more thoroughly recall the matter to the alcalde's mind, he drew out the ancient weapon he had used as a persuader on that occasion, and pointed significantly to the six chambers.

Francisco attempted one of his old magisterial frowns, but it was a sad failure. He realized too fully the great change in his condition.

"Can I see Mr. Jessup?" he asked again, more appealingly than before.

Pike was anxious to know how he had got there and how he came; and directed several questions to this point, but without receiving any satisfaction. Then he turned and led the way toward one of the buildings.

One of the men came out in answer to his hail; and when the door was thrown open, he conducted Francisco into the interior.

They found there Giles Jessup and the Wentworths.

As soon as the ex-alcalde saw Wentworth, he got down on his knees, and crawled toward the bed on which that gentleman was lying. Such an exhibition of pitiable and abject humiliation no one there had ever witnessed.

"It is you, Senor Wentworth!" Francisco whined, drawing himself half erect near the bed. "I have traveled all these miles to see you. To see you and Mr. Jessup!"

Jessup gave him a pitying look. He had been astonished when it was announced that Francisco was there and had called for him. He was doubly astonished now at the man's appearance and manner.

"What is it we can do for you?" he asked, kindly.

"You can help me. Oh, senors, you can help me! Mr. Wentworth here has influence and power. I have come to beg him to use it in my behalf. I am a fugitive from the vengeance of the Government. There is a price on my head. If I am taken, I shall be shot as a traitor!"

"I am afraid I can do nothing for you," said Wentworth, hesitating to crush Francisco's hopes.

"Oh, but you can! You must! If you do not, I am a lost and ruined man. Do not refuse me, Senor Wentworth! Please, do not!"

He put up his hands appealingly, while the intense fear and anxiety that tormented him gave a ghastly pallor to his countenance.

Jessup's sympathies were almost changed to disgust, as he witnessed this exhibition of craven-heartedness. He admired a man of courage. Francisco showed nothing but cowardice. And yet this had been the pompous alcalde of Carmencita.

"How the mighty have fallen!" he thought, turning away to conceal his real feelings. "Once throned in pride and power, there is none now so poor as to do him reverence!"

"My dear sir!" said Wentworth, "there is not a man in the province more powerless to-day than I am. I see you do not know that I, myself, am a fugitive from the power—or rather the insults—of the regular Government. Nevertheless, it is a fact. I can do nothing for you."

The ex-alcalde was not inclined to believe a word of this truthful confession. He fancied Wentworth was toying with his distress, and became, if possible, more humble and prayerful than ever.

He told how he had come to follow Wentworth to his mine in the mountains. While crouching

in a growth of chaparral near Alvarez, sorely pressed and not knowing what to do, he had chanced to hear some passing soldiers speak of Wentworth, and from what he could catch of the conversation, he gathered the idea that Wentworth had gone to his mine. As nothing was said to the contrary, he jumped to the conclusion that Wentworth was high in favor with the Government officers.

He had had Wentworth in mind when he approached Alvarez, thinking if he could get to see him he might persuade him to intercede with the Government. He remembered that he had favored Wentworth once, in securing Jessup's appointment as lieutenant under Roderigo, and he meant to make this the basis of his plea.

As soon as the troopers were gone he had started for the mine, with whose location he was familiar.

"You mean to press me into a confession!" was his despairing cry, when informed by Wentworth of his lack of power to assist him. "If you will promise to help me, I will tell you everything."

Up to this time, Salmon Pike had listened to Francisco's sayings only in an amused way. Now his interest quickened, and he bent forward with manifest eagerness.

Jessup and Wentworth were bewildered by this last declaration of the Mexican. Evidently they did not know what he was driving at.

"What do you mean?" was Jessup's amazed question. "You speak of a confession!"

He noticed that Pike had turned from the cowering ex-alcalde and was bending on him a searching glance.

"You will drive me to it, I see!" and there was a hopeless wail in Francisco's words. "But I will tell freely—ay! tell everything—if you will only promise to intercede in my behalf with the Government!"

"We can do nothing for you," Wentworth declared, not knowing what to make of all this. "I don't know what secret you may have on your mind, nor how it can concern us. If you reveal it, you must take the risk of the action without any promises. We can give you no promises."

Wentworth was still suffering from his injuries, and in consequence the excitement of the scene was beginning to tell on him. There was a flush on his cheeks and an unnatural brightness in his eyes.

Jessup noted this, and suggested that the revelation be postponed, or that Francisco relate to him privately whatever he had to tell.

This the ex-alcalde was not willing to do. He still believed that Wentworth had great influence with the officers at Alvarez, and steadily refused to believe anything else. Consequently, he wished to make his statement to Wentworth, believing a direct appeal would be the more effective.

Jessup took him by the shoulder, requesting him to arise and accompany him into another room. To this the half-crazed Mexican resisted violently. He would not go; and only force could tear him from Wentworth's bedside.

"Let him stay!" Wentworth urged. "If he so desires to make his statement to me, he shall have the privilege."

Salmon Pike was closely watching Jessup, his jealous eye taking in every word and facial expression. He had not lost his distrust of this man, and he was wondering now if Jessup did not really wish to prevent Francisco's proposed confession. He had long had his suspicions of Francisco's true character. What was the confession to consist of? Would it implicate Jessup?

These queries he revolved quickly; and his longing to have Francisco say his say then and there increased.

"I want you to hear what I have to say, Senor Wentworth!" Francisco asserted. "I fear it might not benefit me, otherwise."

"Go on!" Wentworth commanded; and as there was no objection from any one there, Francisco unfolded his revelation.

"It is about the River Rustlers," with a shivering glance at his listeners. "None of you knew the extent of that organization. Thank Heaven! its power is broken!"

At this mention of the River Rustlers, Salmon Pike was, metaphorically speaking, all ears.

"It took in a number of ranchmen and cowboys on the other side of the river, and there was a large contingent of Mexican allies on this side. Coates Foster was one of the principals. But he was no higher in power than I was."

This confession of his own complicity startled every one, save Salmon Pike. Pike had long guessed the truth, so far as Francisco was concerned.

He then proceeded to reveal the names of the chief offenders on both sides of the river. The bandit organization, according to his story, had indeed been widespread. A large number of people in Carmencita and in Alvarez had given them aid and encouragement, and many of these people had been of exalted rank and influence. The ramifications of the league seemingly reached everywhere, and its spies were innumerable. This explained why all attempts to suppress it had so signally failed.

Much to Salmon Pike's disappointment, Giles

Jessup's name was not mentioned by the ex-alcalde. He told himself, however, that possibly this was because of Jessup's presence.

When Francisco finished his story, and again received the assurance that Wentworth could in no manner aid him, he was completely crushed. Up to that time, he had fancied Wentworth's refusal was intended to draw out this confession. Now, he saw how completely he had been mistaken and misled. He incriminated himself, and all to no purpose.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A WAR OF WORDS.

DOMINIQUE GERVASE had been guided by deliberate designs when he bore the Durban to the retreat of the outlaws in the hills. The beauty of Jessie Durban had appealed to his passionate nature; and the tint of her cheeks and the glory of her eyes had acted upon him as a controlling impulse.

As has been said, he hated Coates Foster with a fervent hatred. He had admitted him to the camp, it is true; but he had done it only after careful consideration. He knew what Foster's feelings for the girl were; but he knew equally as well that a declaration of love on Foster's part would bring to that individual a prompt and decided refusal. In addition, by admitting Foster to the camp, he would have him in his power.

At the first favorable opportunity, on the day following Foster's conversation with Jessie, Dominique approached her.

Durban had partially recovered from his state of apathy, and at the time was strolling with Foster along the further boundary of the camp. Dominique had chosen this as a favorable moment, wishing to see Jessie alone.

"It is a beautiful day, my wild bird!" addressing her in as smiling and pleasing a manner as was possible to him. "I hope you are enjoying yourself. It is a pity to keep you cooped up here, and I hope to be able to release you soon."

"Why not do it now?" Jessie asked, facing him with flashing eyes. "Why do you hold us here? I do not see what you are to gain by it."

Her eyes drooped and a flush came into her face as she caught the look which Gervase cast on her.

"I keep you here because it pleases me!" and the villain laughed harshly. "Isn't that a good reason, my dear? The best of all reasons, it seems to me!"

She turned as if she would retire into the cave.

"Stay!" he exclaimed, catching her by the sleeve. "That scoundrel, Coates Foster, has been having his say, and now it is my turn. I fancy my chances are quite as good as his. You care nothing for either of us, as a blind man could see. To a man like Foster, that may make a big difference; but it makes not a particle of difference to me. I mean to have you for my wife, whether you want it so or not!"

She shuddered at the man's coarse brutality.

"You are pleased with my words, I see!" a sneer disfiguring his features. "That makes it pleasant for both of us. I am an outlaw now, and a traitor, with a double price on my head. It is not likely, therefore, that I shall go back to the delightful haunts of civilization. Senorita, you would make a splendid robber queen! You have a defiant and haughty air about you. Don't you think, if you should take the matter into serious consideration, that you might be won to my view of the matter?"

"Never!" and she retreated affrightedly, having previously released herself from his hateful grasp. "I would die first!"

"Dying isn't so pleasant a thing, to one of your age. And then there's your father! I presume you would do a great deal for him?"

There was an implied threat in the words that chilled her.

"You love your father!" mockingly. "My dear, it would be a terrible thing to see him suffer!"

"What do you mean?" she demanded, in a choking voice.

"I mean that if you do not do as I wish, your father will pay the penalty of your refusal. I have him in my power. As cruel a death as ever a man died, he shall die! Think well of it, senorita. You can prevent this. Will you do it? The responsibility rests with you!"

With this shot, he turned abruptly and left her dismayed and horrified.

A few feet away he met Coates Foster returning with Sylvester Durban.

"I should like a few words with you, Foster!" beckoning to him.

Durban continued on to the cave, and Foster stepped aside with the Mexican.

"You had some words with me this morning," said Dominique, in a voice that was preternaturally cold and even. "It was in reference to the wild bird back yonder."

Foster had suspected Dominique of evil designs against Jessie, and had taxed him with them. This was what the Mexican referred to.

"I have been talking to her," Dominique con-

tinued. "Saying sweet things, you understand! She is an angel, Foster!"

Foster's brow grew black as a thunder-cloud. "Be careful how you speak of her!" was his angry warning. "I won't stand much of that kind of nonsense, Dominique!"

"It is a ticklish subject!" and Dominique showed his white, even teeth, like a dog at bay. "But ticklish subjects must be handled sometimes. The little lady has a liking for me, Foster. You accused me this morning of having designs on her—of an intention to carry her away. Why should I carry her away? She is here now, and shall remain here—with me!"

"You mean that you propose to ignore my rights in the matter?" bristling aggressively.

"Something of that kind," narrowly watching Foster, fearing the latter might attack him. "I can't go back to the towns—and you can. That is, you can, if you play your cards right, and turn the sweet side of your nature to the public gaze."

Foster's temper was rising fast.

"I shall have something to say about that, Dominique! You are at the head of the band now, but the rights of a member belong to me. In certain things a member has equal rights with his chief."

"You forget that you are my prisoner!" Dominique declared suggestively.

"Your prisoner?"

"Ay! that is what I said. You voluntarily became my prisoner, and I shall hold you as such. What rights has a prisoner, may I ask?"

"I shall go and come as I please!" Foster retorted.

"Try it and see!"

For the first time Coates Foster began to realize that he had done a very unwise thing in placing himself in the power of this man. There was not a more unscrupulous scoundrel on the face of the earth than Dominique Gervase. And Foster had already seen enough to know that the men of the band—what few remained of them—had become completely subservient to his wishes.

"You cannot hold me here!" he asserted, nevertheless, resolved to make a show of resistance. "You ought to know me too well, Dominique, to think I will for a moment submit to the outrage you contemplate."

Although angered almost beyond endurance, he managed to maintain an outward control of his temper.

Dominique elevated his eyebrows and looked at him inquiringly.

"If you push me," and there was a steely glitter in Foster's dark orbs, "it will be the worse for you. I warn you. I shall manage to deliver you into the hands of the Government, if by so doing I sacrifice myself!"

It was a threat not to be despised.

He turned away, as he gave it utterance, leaving the Mexican to ponder over it at his leisure.

"He thinks to frighten me from my course!" Dominique muttered, as he looked at Foster's retreating figure. "Well, I have the whip-hand here; and we shall see what we shall see!"

CHAPTER XL.

A PRAYER FOR PARDON.

"PARDNERS, this is tough!"

Salmon Pike, seated on a pony, had been surprised and surrounded by a number of men, who now threatened him with their weapons.

"Hyer I thought I was a-trailin' Joe Dobson," he continued, plaintively, "an' I've run slap into you. Wuss luck!"

He elevated his sharp nose into the air and gave a sniff of disgust.

He knew he had fallen into the hands of a party of River Rustlers, though no sign of a knowledge of this fact escaped him. He was not far from the secret retreat of the Rustlers; and had in fact been making a quiet search for that very place.

For this purpose he had been sent there by Jessup, who was still at Wentworth's mining-camp.

As he glanced again at the threatening array of faces, he saw that Dominique was of the number.

"Howdy!" doffing his worn hat, and bowing with as near an approach to Chesterfieldian politeness as he could attain to. "I'd rather see you just now than the original Joe Dobson himself. I would so. If you'll just call off these gentlemen with the shooters I'll be everlastin' obliged."

At this quaint appeal, Dominique Gervase pushed himself forward and ordered the men back by a wave of the hand.

"You were looking for us?" putting the query with unwonted sweetness. "Well, now that you have found us, what?"

The style of the question made Pike aware of the fact that he had not stumbled on these men accidentally, but had fallen into a trap they had laid.

"Wa'n't lookin' fer nobody, 'ceptin' of Joe Dobson, an' didn't much calculate that I had any chance o' findin' him. But I'm glad to see you just the same. I remember you fu'st rate, an' I reckon you do me, so we ought to git along well together!"

Notwithstanding these reassuring statements, Pike had a deep sense of uneasiness. He knew Gervase's character full well, and there was nothing in that knowledge to give him comfort. "Come, come! Let up on that nonsense! What are you doing here? Tell us that, will you?"

Pike assumed an appearance of vexation, and relapsed into a stubborn silence.

The River Rustlers had put away their rifles, deeming their chief able to cope with the old man, and were preparing to go into camp at that point.

"Well, I shall not press you on that subject. I know why you came here quite as well as if you had told me. And I am glad you came. There isn't another man I should prefer to see just now."

Pike did not know what the Mexican was driving at, and maintained his attitude of sullen defiance.

"Slip off your pony, and sit down here," Dominique commanded, pointing to a rock near by. I want to have a talk with you. That's why I had my men lay for you here."

Pike glanced about as if he had some thought of making a dash for liberty.

"There is no use of making a run for it," Dominique asserted, interpreting the glance.

"You couldn't get away if you had the fastest horse in the State. My men are good shots, and they would be sure to get you. Climb down! I don't mean to harm you."

Pike fancied there was a ring of truth in the words, and so he reluctantly scrambled out of the big saddle and walked slowly to the rock.

One of the men came forward and took charge of the pony, hopping it and turning it out to graze with the others.

"It isn't to be expected that you will believe me when I say I have been wishing to see you," said Gervase, as he seated himself on the boulder at the old man's side. "All the same, it is the truth. You know how the war has gone, and therefore, you know something of our condition here. We went into the fight on the insurgent side; and that side has been defeated. They haven't yet admitted it and propose to continue the struggle, but there is no show for the rebels. You are aware of that as well as I am."

Notwithstanding his many years' experience with such men, Salmon Pike was much mystified. He did not yet see the drift of Dominique's thoughts.

"All the world knows it, except some hot-head troopers and a few officers, and they are blind because they will not see. They are to make another stand, and will be beaten; and then comes the end. It was El Espada's misfortune to cast his fate in with these rebels. His sympathies and those of his men naturally lay in that direction—and besides they were promised pardon and honors. As soon as the rebellion is crushed, they will be hunted like wolves in the mountains."

"As they ought to be!" Pike blurted.

"That's a matter of opinion," somewhat coldly and curtly. "We'll not discuss that. You have seen the officer in command at Alvarez. I want you to carry a message to him from me."

"A-gittin' down to bizness!" was Pike's sententious comment. "That strikes me. I'll go to Alvarez, or any place else, if you'll on'y take yer grippers off o' me an' lemme."

"That's what I mean to do. You came here looking for our camp, but if you should look for a month you wouldn't be able to find it."

Pike had his own opinion about that, but he did not attempt a contradiction.

"Your own experience ought to show you that. We have sentinels posted, who are able to see and report any advance in time to render search for us ineffective. We can hold out in these hills for years. But we don't want to. We want to go in and surrender ourselves, but we are not sufficiently anxious to do that to put a rope around our necks by the act. If the Government will grant us free pardon, we will deliver ourselves up. Otherwise, if they want us, they will have to come and get us."

"That is the message that I want you to bear to the governor. If he accepts the proposition, let him send a man to this place. We can see him when he comes, and there will be some one here to meet him."

Pike had been thinking about the Durban, and he now questioned Dominique bluntly concerning them.

"Yes, we have them!" he confessed. "I meant to have mentioned them, if you had given me time. They have friends who are doubtless influential with some of the Government officers. We will surrender them, if pardon is granted us."

Dominique was about to say more, but discreetly checked himself. It was on his tongue to reveal his intentions toward Jessie Durban, and to add that as a threat to bring the officials to terms. But he feared it might not be the best thing to do, and so held his peace.

Pike agreed to carry the message to the governor in command at Alvarez. He, too, was thinking of Jessie Durban and her father.

He had a pretty accurate idea of the direction and location of the bandit stronghold; but he felt it would be safer to secure the release of the Durban in the manner indicated by Dominique than to make a fight to ascertain that object.

He was not allowed to depart, however, before morning. Dominique wished to assure himself that Pike meant to act fairly, and that was his reason for forcing him to remain.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE GOVERNOR'S WARNING.

As Pike started across the open country, he felt that he had had a queer experience. While with this band of River Rustlers, he had been treated not as a prisoner, but as an honored guest, the best of everything their supplies afforded had been placed before him.

"It 'most made me feel as if I was a king-pin among 'em, myself!" he muttered, looking back at the little grove from which he had started and where they still were.

His pony was fresh from the rest of the night and from the abundance of feed it had had, and cantered along at a brisk pace.

Pike had promised Dominique and his men that he would go direct to Alvarez; but he deviated from this lightly, turning aside to visit Wentworth and Jessup at the mine.

The trip was a long and toilsome one, and he did not reach Alvarez until early the next morning.

All was bustle and confusion there, as it had been when he had last visited the place. The insurrection was on its last legs; but the insurgents had strongly intrenched themselves in an almost impregnable position a few miles from the city, and the Government was now massing troops for the purpose of dislodging them.

It was a great change to the old man, coming from the desert silence of the mountains to this scene of life and activity.

He was determined to see the man in charge of affairs in Alvarez, in spite of the many things that might tend to discourage an interview. Much depended on it: and he had been urged by Jessup not to let anything stand in the way of his success.

Jessup and Wentworth had been strongly exercised over the communications brought by the old man from the River Rustlers. Mrs. Wentworth, too, took a lively interest in Pike's narration of his encounter with Dominique. She had a motherly feeling for Jessie Durban, and was much distressed because of the troubles that had befallen the girl.

Jessup's earnest entreaties, as well as his own natural inclinations, drove Pike forward into the vortex at Alvarez.

He was conducted by a guard through the lines of sentries, when he had made known his request to see the governor. Some coins dropped into the hands of this man made him subservient to Pike's wishes.

But even though the old man was thus able to push his way to the magnificent building where the officers had established their headquarters, he was kept outside cooling his heels for nearly a half day before any one would deign to grant him audience.

Finally his patience was rewarded, and he was conducted into a chamber where the governor sat in state.

The glitter and pomp of this great personage did not in the least abash the old man. He remembered Pedro Francisco, and took courage. The governor was flying high now, but he might come down after awhile like the stick of the rocket.

In a few characteristic sentences, Pike told his story, communicating it through an interpreter.

"The governor wishes to know if you have brought a letter from Senor Gervase?" the interpreter questioned.

"Tell his high-mightyness that I plum fergot that important p'ticular. But my word is as good as a newspaper. I'm a-givin' it to him straight, Dominique wants to come in, under them conditions."

The governor looked at him in a way that was not all pleasant; and Pike returned his glances with interest.

"I hain't no chicken-thief, to be stared at in that way!" he grumbled to himself. "Ner I hain't no River Rustler; though the governor do look at me as if he thought I was."

"You may tell Dominique Gervase," the governor thundered, while his brow grew black as midnight, "that I have received his message, and return one in defiance. What care I for these prisoners he holds? Personally, they are nothing to me. But, and mark my words if he harms a hair of their heads, he shall pay for it with his life. I am weary of treating with such as he. These petitions come to me daily. They wear out my time and patience. The traitorous scoundrels! They took up arms against their country, and now they get down on their knees to avoid the consequences. You may tell him that I expect nothing but his unconditional surrender. If he refuses, he shall be hunted down, and shot like a dog!"

A vindictive look sat on the governor's face as he delivered this threatening message; and the

old man was not sorry when the interview was pronounced ended and he was conducted away.

"No wonder Francisco, an' Dominique, an' all the rest o' 'em, air a-gittin' down on their marrer-bones an' a-prayin' fer pardon! If I was in their fix, I think I should do a little prayin' o' that kind myself. An' I'd write out my will too, fer fear the prayer shouldn't be answered. That guv'nor's got murder in his heart, er I'm off in my bearin's."

Pike made his way out of Alvarez as quickly as possible, and started with this disheartening message for the point selected by Dominique. He preferred to bear it himself, as he did not intend to deliver it in the exact language used by the officers. That might be to defeat some of Pike's plans and jeopardize the lives of Durban and his daughter.

And as he left the place his mind was busy with the addition he proposed to make to the governor's statement.

CHAPTER XLII.

A SURPRISE.

THERE was something of a surprise in store for Salmon Pike, as well as for Jessup and the Wentworths, and the entire party at the mines.

The governor at Alvarez had not given entire credence to Pike's account of how he had fallen in with Dominique and the River Rustlers.

It occurred to that astute gentleman that there was something fishy in the details of the story. And the more he thought about it, the more certain he became that Pike was one of the Rustlers himself.

Hence, when the old man departed from the town, he was followed, at the governor's command, by some spies.

As he made it a point to visit the mine, on his way to the place selected by Dominique, the spies, in following his trail, naturally brought up there.

Thinking they had run him to earth, and that they had discovered the hiding-place of the outlaws, they hastened with all speed back to the town with this information.

By the evening of the following day, Wentworth's mining-camp was closely invested by Government troopers.

Seldom was a man more astonished than was Salmon Pike, when, on his return, he drew near that place, and saw the camp-fires of the soldiers.

He rubbed his eyes again and again to make sure he had seen rightly; and then, getting down on his hands and knees, crept carefully forward.

"Beats my time!" he ejaculated, as he drew near enough to make out the uniform of the soldiers.

It was just after dark, and this had prevented them from noticing his approach.

The light from the camp-fires revealed the buildings plainly; and as he looked, he saw Jessup and another appear, supporting between them William Wentworth. They were protected by a white flag, which they held aloft.

"They are comin' out to talk to the p'izen critters," Pike snorted, in bewilderment and disgust. "I'll have to find out the meanin' o' this!"

Only a short time before, the leader of the Government troops, after having thrown a cordon of men about the place, sent in a peremptory demand for the surrender of the camp, addressing those within it as River Rustlers.

Jessup had sent back by the bearer of the demand, a statement of who they were and how they came to be there.

This the officer had taken time to consider, and, deeming it a falsehood, had sent a more threatening message than the first, and it was this which induced Wentworth to seek a conference under shelter of a flag of truce.

The commander had heard of Wentworth; and he looked very coldly at him as that gentleman was conducted forward. What he had heard did not incline him to leniency or to rely strongly on Wentworth's statements.

"I wish to assure you, on the honor of a gentleman, that these people here are not what you think," Wentworth said, going directly to the heart of the matter.

Wentworth was still very weak and pale, a circumstance that might have tended to pity in the hearts of some beholders.

With this short introduction, he proceeded to recount the circumstances that caused them to leave Alvarez, his meeting with Jessup's men, and their coming here.

"Have you not with you the little old man who came from the River Rustlers to negotiate for their surrender?" the officer asked, eying him sharply.

"He is not here!" Wentworth declared, speaking with emphasis, for he believed that at that moment Pike was far away.

"I shall have to look before I am satisfied on that point! The governor believes that the old man is one of the bandits; and he was trailed to this camp. He came from them, according to his own story, and he returned here. What has become of him?"

"The governor has been led into an error," said Jessup, hastening to correct this false im-

pression. "The man you speak of is Salmon Pike. He went to Alvarez as a message-bearer from the River Rustlers, it is true; but he is not one of them. He came by here on his return, though he is not here now."

The officer was not satisfied. He still thought the men he had cooped up at Wentworth's camp a remnant of El Espada's band.

"I shall have to make a search!" he repeated.

To this Wentworth and Jessup acceded. They had failed to convince this man that Pike was not one of the outlaws. But this seemed a matter of small consequence. Pike was away; and before he came back, the officer could be satisfied, and the troopers would return to Alvarez.

A detail of men was, therefore, selected; and these accompanied a similar detail from Jessup's force in a search of the buildings.

Meanwhile, Salmon Pike had had his curiosity aroused to a feverish pitch. He could see all that was occurring, but could not catch a word.

When Wentworth and Durban retreated from the presence of the officer, the old man crept along after them, though at a considerable distance to one side to avoid discovery.

"By the great horn spoon! This gits twisteder and twisteder! Purty soon I won't know whether I'm a-crawlin' on the sky or on the groun'. I can gin'rally see through a grin-stone as well as the next man, if there's a big enough hole in it. But I can't see through this!"

He wriggled along until near the door of the house into which Jessup and Wentworth had disappeared. He was about to knock for admittance, and had risen half-erect for that purpose.

At that moment the searching party came around the corner of the building. As soon as the troopers saw him, they recognized him as the man they were after, and pounced upon him with much ado.

The confusion that followed brought Jessup to the door.

"Will you please to explainify hyer!" Pike howled, as he struggled with his captors. "These hyer chaps have hopped onto me like a lot of henhawks onto a spring chicken, an' I'm plagued if I know what they mean by it."

Jessup was much embarrassed by this turn of affairs. Pike's discovery at that time was a most unfortunate thing.

"Senor, he was trying to slip away!" one of the troopers exclaimed addressing Jessup in Mexican. "We caught him in the act."

"It's a lie!" Pike roared, for he understood enough of the language to gather the man's meaning. "I wasn't a-tryin' to slip away; I was a-tryin' to slip back!"

Jessup was followed to the door by Wentworth, and the two endeavored to explain this untoward circumstance in a satisfactory manner. But their words were thrown away.

The entire party was conducted before the frowning officer; and the result of Pike's discovery by the details of searchers was that the Wentworths and Jessup's entire command were ordered back to Alvarez for examination before the governor.

CHAPTER XLIII.

SLIPPERY DOMINIQUE.

THE communication which Salmon Pike brought from the governor to Dominique, was not at all pleasing to the latter. Pike had delivered the message very much as he had received it. He had, however, placed a special emphasis on the governor's threat of punishment if the Durban were injured.

Dominique was thinking of this, as he strode moodily backward and forward within his camp, a few days after the events just narrated. Affairs were not going to suit him. Many of his men had been showing an ugly disposition of late, and were becoming rebellious and disobedient. In their flight to that point, after the death of El Espada, they had been drawn to him by a belief that he would be able to lead them out of their present difficulty; and his lack of success was largely the cause of the present trouble.

There were other causes at work, which were not so manifest, but which were equally potent.

The pretense of holding Coates Foster as a prisoner had been kept up after a fashion, though even Durban noticed that Foster was permitted great liberties.

On this morning, Foster was away, strolling along the mountain-side. He had complained of ill-health, and told Durban that Dominique had consented to these morning walks on that account; but that he was, nevertheless, so closely guarded he could not get away.

Dominique approached the cave in which the prisoners were held. The interior was dry and rocky; and Jessie's deft fingers had transformed it into a pleasant abode. There was very little to ornament it with—only grasses and wild flowers; but these she had arranged tastefully; and the skins which formed the couches had been cleaned and aired, and the few articles of home-made furniture placed to the best advantage.

Jessie Durban was a girl of spirit and determination—one of the girls who rise to emergencies, instead of being crushed by them. She had sorrow and distress of her own, and new the

care of her apathetic and hopeless father had fallen on her. The future was overcast and the outlook dreary, but not on that account did she give up to repining. She resolved to be cheerful, for her father's sake, if for no other.

She was endeavoring to busy and content herself with some work, when Dominique's hateful shadow fell across the narrow opening. She detested this man, and feared him; and not without cause.

"I am glad to see you looking so well this morning," he said, advancing and deliberately seating himself on one of the stools. "It does me good to see you so. Most women would spend half of their time in crying their pretty eyes out, if they were in your situation. It can't be because I am here?"

Durban was sitting in the further end of the cave, and had been paying little heed to Jessie's movements. He looked up, though, as Dominique entered, and now strained his ears to hear what was said.

Jessie made no reply to Dominique's question. "I hope you have been thinking of what I said last," the Mexican went on, not seeming to notice her silence. "You know I promised to set your father at liberty, if you would consent to marry me. There is a priest in a little town not far away—a jolly padre, and a friend of mine. He will do the job up in first-class shape, if you will but say the word."

Ever since he had first approached her on this subject, he had continued to torment her thus at intervals.

"What do you say?" snapping his fingers, impatiently.

"Just what I said before!" not looking at him. "You ought to know by this time that you are only wasting your breath in talking to me in that way."

Dominique only laughed in his disagreeable manner.

"I think I know why you say that," showing his wolfish teeth. "It is because of Giles Jessup. I've no doubt you think Jessup quite a saint."

She had expected him to name Coates Foster.

"Mr. Jessup is a very nice gentleman!" giving her head a defiant toss. "Much better than some people who are inclined to slander him when he is away. I don't think you would say that, Mr. Gervase, if he was here!"

"You don't know Jessup as well as I do. You think you do, but you don't. I suppose I will startle you, now, if I say he has long been one of El Espada's River Rustlers."

"You won't startle me," and her eyes flashed, "for I have long been used to hearing lies from you."

Dominique did not like her frankness, as his frown showed. But he continued, as if he had not heard her:

"Giles Jessup is a much bigger scamp than I am, and that is saying a deal. He was one of El Espada's men before I joined the band. He may be a smarter man than I. At any rate, he managed to conceal his villainy from the public much better than I did."

Sylvester Durban had got up from his stool at the opposite end of the cave and drawn nearer the speakers. He was evidently much excited, for his fingers twitched and his face worked strangely.

"You don't believe a word I say?" as Jessie maintained her silence.

"Not a word."

With much deliberation, Gervase felt in one of the pockets of his coat and drew out a crumpled letter.

"If you will look at that," he said, extending it to her, "I think you will be convinced."

She felt that she ought not to read it; but her curiosity overcame her scruples, when she glanced at the handwriting. She had received notes from Giles Jessup, and believed this to be his penmanship.

Therefore, as she ran her eyes down the written page, she was horror-struck. The letter purported to be from Jessup to El Espada, and its contents concerned the movements of the River Rustlers.

If Salmon Pike could have seen that communication, all his doubts as to Jessup's true character would have been dissipated.

Dominique Gervase watched the girl closely, and noted with supreme satisfaction the thoughts that were written on her expressive features.

Durban had crept still nearer, and now looked over her shoulder at the letter.

That both were inexpressibly surprised and shocked could not for a moment be doubted.

"What do you think of it?" Gervase inquired. "I suppose you will insist that Mr. Jessup is an angel. I never heard that any angels belonged to the River Rustlers!"

"I will not believe a word of it!" Jessie declared, scornfully tossing the paper from her. "Mr. Jessup never wrote that!"

"But the penmanship?"

"I say he never wrote it! I don't care anything about the penmanship! I just know he couldn't write such a letter as that!"

She was much agitated, and her cheeks were hot with indignation.

Dominique picked up the discarded letter and stowed it again in his pocket.

"A woman convinced against her will is of the same opinion still!" That is as true as Scripture. It may be in the Bible for all I know, as I can't say that I am very familiar with that book. But whoever said it, knew what he was talking about. You know, from that letter, that Giles Jessup is one of the cattle-thieves, and yet you won't admit it. Very well; you don't have to. But, all the same, I don't think you will regard him quite so highly in the future."

He was about to leave the cabin, after delivering this thrust; but as he turned away, Sylvester Durban sprang on him with ungovernable fury.

Durban had once distrusted Jessup, but his feelings had undergone a change in that respect. So great a change, in fact, that he could not endure the slanderous words to which Dominique had given utterance. While listening to Dominique's talk, his anger had so grown that he could no longer control it.

"You villain! You scoundrel!" he exclaimed, striking blindly at the Mexican and endeavoring to drag him down. "Take back those slanders, or I will kill you!"

Jessie screamed in fright, and rushed to her father's assistance. She had seen Dominique reach for his knife, and feared the worst.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MASK REMOVED.

FOSTER had strolled back into the camp, and Jessie's scream brought him in quick haste to the scene of the trouble.

As he came through the cave's entrance, he saw Dominique grasp the girl by the hair and endeavor to push her from him. He also saw the cruel knife that gleamed in the hand of the Mexican.

These things gave him the impression that Dominique had attacked Jessie, for some reason; and with a hoarse bellow, he struck the knife to the earth and leaped on the man.

As he did so, Dominique released his hold of Jessie and her father, and turned to this new antagonist. But he had been taken at a disadvantage. The fall of the knife rendered him weaponless, and as he swung around toward Foster, a heavy blow from the latter's fist stretched him at full length on the floor of the cavern.

The Durbans had fled in wild alarm to the rear of the underground apartment, the father having sufficiently recovered his senses to realize how foolishly he had acted.

Dominique struggled to his feet, passed a hand across his eyes to clear away the mist that swam before them, and backed against the wall.

"It seems to me you might attend to your own affairs, Foster!" he growled, nursing his bruised cheek. "What call had you, a man of your stamp, to interfere here?"

Both men were in an ugly mood, and the affair seemed not to have ended.

"It's true, I'm a prisoner here," Foster returned, with a side glance at Jessie. "But," viciously, "I don't propose to stand any nonsense because of that!"

"A prisoner!" and there was a world of meaning in the sneering tone. "So is the unchained devil a prisoner! You have played that game long enough, Foster. I won't help you in any further deception of these people. I have played tool to you quite as much as I intend to!"

"Be careful what you say!" and Foster stepped threateningly toward him.

Dominique dropped a hand to his hip, as if he had a weapon concealed there.

"What I say I stand by. You are a lying scoundrel, Coates Foster, and are no more a prisoner here than I am. That's the truth, and you know it!"

"Hear the scamp's falsehoods," trying to laugh, and looking in Jessie's direction.

"I have heard them," she said, "but I don't think they are falsehoods. You have been very cunning, Mr. Foster, but I saw through your scheming several days ago!"

At this declaration on the part of the girl, Foster's fury broke all bounds. With the cry of a maddened beast, he launched himself at Gervase, taking him somewhat by surprise and bearing back against the wall.

The two fell together to the floor in a terrific struggle for the mastery.

It was not of long duration. Foster again obtained the advantage; and after choking the Mexican half-insensible, coolly arose and proceeded to tie him with a bit of rope that lay in a coil near one of the couches.

When Dominique returned to full consciousness, he found himself bound hand and foot.

"You shall pay for this!" he exclaimed, glaring at Foster with baffled vindictiveness. "You shall pay for this dearly. I'll have you shot for this outrage!"

"Oh, will you?" elevating his brows in mock questioning. "Your intentions are very kind. But I fancy you'll find it a little difficult to carry them out."

He stepped to the opening, as if about to call to one of his men, but was diverted from his purpose by the shower of bitter vituperation which Gervase hurled at him.

"Be careful what you say!" he warned, advancing as if he meant to strike the helpless man. "I shall have to muzzle that serpent tongue of yours."

Instead of heeding him, Gervase repeated the charges he had made so short a time before.

Without seeming to care that the Durbans observed him, Foster gave the Mexican a brutal kick; and after some horrible threats, hurried outside.

They could hear him shouting to the bandits who were nearest.

These ran to him, at his command; and with them he re-entered the cave.

Before doing so, however, he had conversed with them a short time in earnest and guarded tones.

"There he is!" he declared, pointing to Gervase. "There is the traitor; and if ever a man deserves death, he is the man!"

The words were bewildering, both to the Durbans and to Dominique.

The latter attempted to rise on an elbow; and, looking at his men shouted:

"Don't you see how I am tied up here? Release me, and take that fellow into custody!"

The command was sharp and stinging, and the men retreated before it almost as precipitately as if he had fired bullets at them.

But Coates Foster only laughed triumphantly. "They've forgotten your lingo! If you'll shout a little louder, probably you can make them understand."

Dominique's gaze wandered about in a helpless way. He had been accustomed to have his men spring willingly and quickly at his bidding.

"The jig is up with you, Dominique! I may as well reveal the truth first as last. Your men have become aware of your double-dealing, and they don't propose to stand it any longer. You have deceived them from the beginning."

"I don't understand you!" shrinking back as if a blow had been aimed at him.

"I presume not. It's usually difficult to understand a thing when one doesn't want to understand it. But we've found out several days ago that you were planning to deliver us into the hands of our enemies."

Dominique gave a gasp of dismay. This statement swept the fog from the skies. It explained the recent rebellious conduct of his men. Foster had plotted against him, and told lies about him, and had turned the hearts of his followers from him. They had been led to believe him treacherous; and were now ready to rend him.

Foster noted the look of fear on the Mexican's face.

"You are coming to your senses I see! I am glad of it. You thought you had the cinch on all of us, and suddenly you found yourself sadly in error."

Then he turned to the men in waiting, and ordered them to carry Dominique outside.

The deposed captain of the band covered them with bitter invectives as they lifted him in their strong arms; and until they had passed beyond hearing, those within the cave were forced to listen to language the most horrible.

Now that he had thrown aside the mask with which he had attempted to conceal his true character from Jessie and her father, Coates Foster was in all outward respects a changed man. The innate devilry of his nature came to the surface, and he took delight in giving it free play. Perhaps this was a relief to him after such long repression.

"I intend to move from here," he declared, turning to Jessie and addressing his words to her, "and of course I shall take you with me. I couldn't think of leaving you and your dear father here as companions for the owls and wolves."

She shrunk from him as she had not even done from Dominique Gervase. The deep villainy revealed in his words and countenance chilled her very soul.

"There is no use of my shamming any longer," with a reckless disdain of consequences. "I have played that game for all it is worth, and have been beaten. I will have no more of it. You've got to go with me, whether you want to or not."

The horrified look she gave him seemed to slightly touch even his callous nature.

"What is the use, Jessie?" argumentatively.

"I am a ruined man, and no amount of good acts on my part can ever make me anything else. There was a time, and it was not so long ago, when I thought I could be a gentleman; and I hoped then to win you for my wife in an honorable manner. But that is all passed. This cursed Mexican war has been the ruin of me. The hungry soldiers have turned all my cattle that were on this side of the river into beef; and even if the financial outlook was better, I should not dare to go back. I was a fool to unite my forces with those of El Espada and the insurgents. But I did it; and you see the consequences!"

As he talked, the iron of bitter regret seemed to enter his soul. He realized how he had sinned and erred, and the penalties of his misdeeds arose before him in all their shadowy and terrible proportions.

From the look on his face, Jessie gained some

inkling of the character of his thoughts; and, taking advantage of this, she pleaded with him to spare her father and herself, and to let them return home in peace.

But Coates Foster was obdurate; and he refused to hearken to her appeal.

CHAPTER XLV.

BACK INTO THE MESHES.

THIS failure of her plea caused Jessie Durban to set herself to some serious thinking; and as she thought, a plan arose before her that promised a ray of hope. In many respects it was a desperate plan, but its failure could not injure their position; and anything was better than inaction and stagnation. She felt that to remain in the power of Coates Foster, now that she understood the height and depth of his villainy, would be worse than death.

She did not at once communicate her thoughts to her father, fearing he might try to dissuade her from so rash an undertaking.

Dominique Gervase, she soon ascertained, was still bound. He had been placed beneath a tree only a few yards from the entrance of the cave. On going to the entrance, she could see him; and even though he had treated her so wrongfully, her heart was filled with pity for him.

This feeling, however, played no part in the plan she was outlining. This plan largely concerned Gervase, and if successful would result in his release, but her commiseration for him had no hand in shaping it.

A close observation of what was taking place in the camp convinced her that Foster was making preparations to leave. But she did not think he would do so that day. There was much to do before the company could be ready for departure. A portion of the men were away.

The new-born resolve which agitated her she was fearful would reveal itself in her face and actions. She essayed to resume the work which she had dropped at Gervase's coming, but her heart was no longer in it; and so she sat, thinking, thinking, throughout the long hours of the day, staring straight across the camp at the mountains which arose opposite. Her veins seemed on fire, and her head throbbed nervously.

She made no movement till long after night-fall. Her father had fallen asleep on his cot in the corner. Happily he was thus able to find relief from the troubles that oppressed him.

She spoke softly and woke him; and when he was sufficiently aroused to comprehend her meaning, she began a cautious detail of her plan. It served to stimulate Durban and make a new man of him. His apathy vanished. But he grew so nervous and shaky, as she continued, that she was forced to stop and warn him against the danger of betraying himself.

"You must calm down!" she urged. "One of the men may come in at any time, and then all will be lost. Leave everything to me. All you need to do is to follow my instructions. Now, do try to be quiet."

"I will!" he affirmed. "I will! Only tell me what to do, and I will do it."

"The first and most necessary thing is to keep still, and try to control that shaking."

She spoke lovingly and soothingly, and her words had a perceptible effect.

She advanced to the entrance and looked out into the gloom.

A camp-fire glowed redly in the darkness, but its light did not penetrate far. Dominique had ceased his cursing and threats, and was lying quietly beneath the tree. She could only make out the bare outlines of his figure. All was quiet and serene.

She retraced her way to her father's side.

"I'm going to creep out to Mr. Gervase," she whispered. "Do not stir until I come back."

She was up and gone before he had time to reply.

She seemed no more than a shadow as she flitted across the open space between the cave and the tree. Gervase was awake. His mental tortures were too great for him to sleep. He lifted his head in a surprised and curious way as he saw her draw near. He had no inkling of her intentions.

Jessie shuddered as she stood before him. She feared this man, yet she now feared Coates Foster more. To cast her fate in with Dominique was only the choice of a lesser evil.

"You would like to escape?" she questioned, bending over him.

The Mexican gave a start of pleasure. There was nothing he would have preferred before that. To remain there meant death to him sooner or later.

"Ay, that I would! Cut these ropes, and see how soon I will get out of here."

"You must take us with you," whispering the words, and looking about to make sure no one was approaching. "Father and I. We are as anxious to leave here as you can be. If you will promise to assist us all in your power, I will cut these cords."

She knew that a simple promise was a thing easily made by Dominique and as easily broken. Yet there was no way to bind him more firmly to the conditions.

"I promise!" was his eager reply. "Just let me loose, and I will help you all I can."

"Can I believe you? Oh, Mr. Gervase! can I believe you?"

The tones were an entreaty.

"I will do what I say!" he protested, with great earnestness. "Why should you doubt me? I shall be killed if I am held here!"

"I have not treated you right, Miss Durban—nor your father! But I pray you, let bygones be bygones. Forget the past if you can. If not, believe that I will try to redeem it. That's what I will do. Upon my honor, I will!"

He was afraid that her doubts would drive her to an abandonment of this plan of escape, and his appeal was piteous.

"I shall have to trust you," she declared.

"You ought to have no fears on that ground. I can't afford to treat you otherwise than honorably. I have no love for Coates Foster, and would like to spite him by getting you out of his power. Then, if I guide you and your father safely to your friends, my chances of getting a pardon will be increased. You see I can't afford to deceive you, Miss Durban!"

Still hesitating, but feeling that she must accept the bare word of this man whether she desired to or not, she stooped down, and cut the cords that bound his wrists. She felt she had delayed too long already. The danger of detection was constant.

"Give me the knife!" trembling with excitement, as he arose to a sitting posture.

It was only a dull blade, one she had used in her culinary work. She gave it to him, and with one quick stroke he severed the cords that held his ankles.

"Now, where is your father?" thrusting the knife into a pocket for use as a weapon of defense. "The sooner we are moving the better I shall feel. Some of those scamps are liable to come prowling around here at any time."

She did not reply, for she had started toward the cave on placing the knife in his hand. In a moment, almost, she was back beneath the tree, her father with her.

Dominique made a careful survey of the situation beyond the tree-shadows before venturing a movement. All was as quiet as could be wished.

Under the lead of the Mexican, they made their way with all care toward the outer confines of the camp on the eastern side. The ponies were picketed just beyond the line, and it was Dominique's intention to secure some of these for use in their dash for liberty.

All went well for a short time, and it seemed that they must surely escape; but the sentinel on that side was wide-awake and vigilant. He saw their skulking figures, and the report of his rifle awoke the slumbering echoes far and near.

The ball splintered the rock near which the fugitives were passing, and seeing that further stealth was useless, they scampered with all speed toward the ponies.

"This way!" Dominique shouted, plunging wildly on and directing the Durban with his voice. "Come this way! If we can reach the horses we are all right."

The shot had aroused the camp, and the sound of a great tumult now reached them. A shower of balls also screamed over their heads, though these inflicted no injury. Jessie could now and then catch the hateful voice of Coates Foster as he urged his men to pursue and retake the escaping prisoners.

The darkness, while it shielded them from the shots of the bandits, greatly hindered their movements. The way was rough, and they stumbled about in a blind and most perplexing fashion.

Suddenly Sylvester Durban uttered a horrified cry. He had pitched over a small ledge and fallen to a rocky surface some six or eight feet below, considerably bruising him.

"I don't think I can get out," he moaned, clutching frantically at the stony side. "Oh, dear! This is dreadful!"

He was almost helpless from his great confusion.

Jessie endeavored to look down into the gloomy depths from whence her father's voice came. She was shaking like a wind-blown leaf.

Dominique Gervase had lunged straight on, being ahead of Durban when he fell.

"Can I help you?" the girl anxiously asked, stooping down and running her hands over the jagged rim of the ledge. "Can you climb up and reach my hand?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Durban wailed, terrified beyond measure. "We shall be taken, sure!"

"Try to climb up here," she urged. "If you can get this high, perhaps I can draw you out. You are not hurt much, are you?"

She succeeded in grasping his fingers, and by a strong effort was able to assist him somewhat. But the climb out of the little gorge was a difficult and painful one, and consumed several minutes—at a time when minutes were more precious than gold.

Sylvester Durban had barely reached the top of the ledge, when the hurrying feet of the River Rustlers sounded close behind them. He attempted to rise and fly with Jessie; but the movement was detected, and they were almost immediately surrounded.

Dominique had succeeded in reaching the

ponies; and, cutting one loose, he sprung to its back, and without saddle or bridle, guided it to the more open country. The Rustlers, however, were not far behind him; and these secured other ponies, and began a hot chase, firing shot after shot at him as his pony thundered away through the night.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DOMINIQUE'S WILD RIDE.

"I HAVE decided that we will remain here and fight!"

Coates Foster had called his men about him, on the morning following Dominique's escape, and thus addressed them.

Those who had pursued Dominique had returned only a short while before, and had brought with them rather startling information. They had narrowly missed falling in with a body of troopers, a few miles to the southward; and it was believed these troopers were searching for the outlaw stronghold.

Foster's decision was greeted with a cheer of approval.

"It was my intention," looking over the stern and scowling faces clustered about him, "to make a change of camp this morning. I do not think it best to do so now. It would require a day or two for us to fortify ourselves as well as we are here. If we should move, it would be almost impossible to conceal our trail so that it could not be followed. Hence, I say we will stay here and fight to the last, and, if need be, die like men!"

The yell that went up from those fierce throats fairly shook the hills. Not all of these men had liked Foster, but they were forced to admire his courage. Bravery and fighting ability were things to win them. Some of them had been displeased at the treatment accorded Dominique. That was now a thing of the past, however. Dominique had been something of a bully; and, even if he had not been, such men are always ready to turn to a new leader.

Coates Foster was really in a desperate mood, and his present courage was largely the outgrowth of fear. Any man will fight, and fight to the death, if crowded into a corner.

Jessie Durban heard the cheers and the words that occasioned them, as she stood in the entrance to the cave. She and her father had been returned to this place, and were now so closely watched that all hope of getting away was abandoned. The only result of her attempt had been the freeing of Dominique.

And Dominique!

It was a mad, wild ride that he took—a ride filled with pain and faintness and fears of failure.

The shots fired after him by the River Rustlers had not been without effect. One of them had struck him in the left shoulder, and plowing its way through, had made a ghastly and terrible wound.

The shock had almost thrown him from the pony; but he had clung blindly to its mane as it dashed on; and, when the fainting-fit had passed away, he had regained his erect position on its back.

"You haven't got me, yet!" he cried, glancing back at his yelling pursuers.

His left arm hung uselessly, but he held to the mane with his right hand and guided the pony by the pressure of his knees. The wound was bleeding profusely. But he had no time to attend to that now; and with a feeling of giddy sickness in his heart and head, he urged the pony on and on, until the shouts of the outlaws grew fainter and fainter and finally died away.

The pony was panting under the tremendous strain to which he had subjected it. It was impossible to continue that wild pace, and with soothing words he drew it down into a walk.

He reeled and could scarcely retain his seat on its back. His clothing was saturated with the blood that had flown so freely from his torn shoulder. It was still bleeding; and the sense of weakness that weighed him down told him his strength was being drained away by the flow.

He was afraid to dismount, lest he might not be able to regain his place. How long or how far he had ridden he scarcely knew. The ride had been one long agony. It seemed to him he had been plunging on at that wild gait for days and weeks and months. Yet the night was still about him, though a rosy flush along the eastern horizon told him the day was not far distant.

He guided the pony to the side of a sloping rock. The rock rose above him; and, by shifting his position, he could lean against it and sustain himself from falling while he strove to bandage his shoulder. With his strong hand he tore his shirt into strips, using his teeth to assist him; and bound these strips about and over the wound as well as he could. The work was poorly and bunglingly done, but he could perform it no better.

Then, with something like a prayer on his lips, he again set the animal in motion. The red flush along the eastern sky was increasing, and it gave him courage. For a long time he had heard no sounds of pursuit.

He set his teeth in a firm resolve. He might die from the effect of the gun-shot, but Coates Foster should not be the gainer thereby.

No, he would live to bring ruin and death to Foster and every member of the band now in the hills. He knew he was badly hurt—perhaps mortally—but he did not intend to crawl away into the desert like a wounded coyote and there perish. He had a work of vengeance to perform, and he would perform it!

He turned the pony in the direction of Wentworth's mining-camp, to the southward of Alvarez. He knew its location well. He had been an acquaintance of Wentworth's in the days gone by, and had more than once visited him at this place. He must sustain his strength, now, until he could reach it!

The sun arose above the low mountain ranges, and climbed higher and yet higher into the blue vault. Notwithstanding his great weakness, Gervase held steadily on his course toward Wentworth's. The distance was long to a man in the full possession of his bodily vigor. To Gervase it seemed an endless trail. Hour after hour crept by with an agonizing slowness. The pony labored and panted, while foam and dust covered its nostrils and flanks.

Fits of blindness came occasionally to the indomitable Mexican, and there were times when he almost lost the consciousness of where he was or what he was attempting. But an unbending rigidity of purpose sustained him throughout the terrible ordeal.

Reeling and oppressed by a deathly giddiness, with his face white and drawn by intense suffering, Dominique at last drew near his goal.

He was seen by the inmates of the camp, though he was not at first recognized. When lifted from the pony—he had not strength to descend himself—he fainted dead away. But he recovered on being borne into one of the buildings; and when he opened his eyes and looked about him, he saw Jessup and the Wentworths, and that queer old man, Salmon Pike. There were others present, but his gaze lingered most pleasurably on these.

The trip to Alvarez, which the party at the Wentworth mining-camp had been forced to make, had resulted in nothing, so far as they were concerned. It had been harassing and vexatious; but as nothing could be shown against them, they had been promptly released.

To Pedro Francisco, however, it had been a most disastrous thing, for it had resulted in his delivery to the Government against which he had taken arms.

As those within the building looked into the face of Dominique Gervase, as he lay stretched on the cot they had prepared for him, they knew he was not long for this world. The wound was a serious one, and it had become fearfully inflamed by reason of the long ride and the neglect. The fever from it burned hotly in every fiber of his being.

He read the truth in the pitying glances they gave him.

"I am to die?" he questioned, faintly.

They hesitated to reply.

"I know it is so. I feel it here," tapping his breast. "I have felt it for some time. But I have accomplished my mission. Ah! it was a fearful ride. It seems to me this fever has been burning me up for days. But I am here!"

There was exultance in his hollow voice.

"Bend down here, that I may tell you. Coates Foster and the River Rustlers have fortified themselves in a camp at the base of the Spanish Peak—to the eastward of it. They hold Jessie Durban and her father. Go there and take them. I have brought my death on me, that I might ride here and tell you this!"

Having said this much, he lapsed into silence and turned from them; soon after sinking into a stupor from which he never recovered.

The effect of his communication was electrical. It threw all there into a state of great excitement; and steps were immediately taken to carry out his wishes.

CHAPTER XLVII.

PLUCKY PIKE.

"Put yer fingers on them purty lips an' hold 'em shet, will ye? and Salmon Pike, crawling slowly through the gloom at the cave's entrance, elevated one horny hand in warning.

He saw before him Jessie Durban, and the words were addressed to her.

A day and a half had elapsed since Dominique Gervase had ridden into the mining-camp in a dying condition and delivered the message that had cost him so much.

Now, Jessup's force, augmented by some Government troopers, was lying in concealment not more than a mile from the intrenched quarters of Coates Foster.

Jessie Durban's eyes opened in wide surprise as she saw Pike's queer figure before her. But for his warning she might have called out in alarm, for his coming was totally unheralded.

"I have come to git you an' yer paw out o' hyer," he announced, drawing himself up within the interior. "There's a-goin' to be the liveliest ole row in this vicinity purty soon that ever you heerd tell on. Fightin' catymounts won't be nuthin' to it. But I want to git you out o' hyer fu'st; an' then you can listen an' hear the comets fall. Great aithquakes! there'll be some people dreadfully s'prised around hyer in

less'n an hour; if all signs don't fail, like the weather prophets!"

Durban had advanced from the position he almost constantly occupied at the further extremity of the cave; and was now looking at Pike, and hearkening to his words with great curiosity.

"I hope you hain't got many trunks to pack ner many flub-dubs to put into 'em. Time's more precious than a gold mine jist now. I've crawled up hyer, right through the camp o' these Rustlers; an' my return ticket won't be good, if I don't go back to onc't!"

The Durbans had very little preparation to make; but before setting about even this, they drew from the old man a more extended account of how he came to be there, and the exact nature of his mission.

He answered their numerous queries in his good-humored and characteristic way, all the time insisting on haste.

Jessup had sent him on in advance, hoping he might be able to penetrate the outlaw camp and rescue the Durbans, thus placing them in safety before the attack. He was to advance on the bandit stronghold in an hour, and in less time, if Pike returned with the prisoners. The chances were good for some hot fighting, and equally good for them to get hurt if they remained in the camp.

When all was in readiness, Pike led the way from the cavern.

Jessie and her father, in spite of their efforts at self-control, were much excited and agitated. They could not help recalling how they had gone in a similar manner from that place only a few nights before, and how woefully they had failed in getting away.

The knowledge that Jessup was so near, was also a cause of much nervousness to Jessie Durban. She had long since ceased to try to conceal from herself the fact that she loved this man. Ay! loved him, and believed in him, in spite of the many whispers, and even open charges, she had heard against him! Much of the distress occasioned by her imprisonment was due to her separation from him; and because she was barred from all communication with him, or knowledge of his movements. She knew he was in constant peril—peril which she believed to be greater even than that which beset her and her father.

Sylvester had none of these things to trouble him. But he was, nevertheless, sorely afraid that this effort might miscarry, as the other had done. Coates Foster had uttered some very threatening language on that previous occasion; and should they again be brought back, it was probable his language would be followed by something harsher.

Salmon Pike had carefully noted the lay of the camp and the positions of the sentries as he came in, and had selected the route he intended to follow in going out. For himself, he had no fears. It was not a new thing for him to thus enter the home of bitter enemies. Watchfulness and danger had for years been to him as boon companions.

He did fear, however, that in the excitement of the retreat, Jessie or her father would do something or say something to reveal them to the outlaws.

He led the way very slowly and with great caution; and, in spite of the many difficulties of the route, succeeded in conveying them in safety through the line of sentries.

They could not see the pleased smile that broke over his face, when they had gained a place of safety and he sunk down on a boulder to rest, but they caught the triumphant thrill in his voice, as he spoke:

"I think that was as neat a job as I ever done;—which is the same as sayin' it hain't the fu'st one. Now, if you'll stretch out yer years like a couple o' burros awaitin' fer hay, an' listen long enough, you'll hear the screamin' o' the wu'st set o' mountain lions that I ever traveled with!"

His words seemed prophetic.

The Durbans had barely settled themselves for a moment's rest beside him, when a series of wild, fierce yells arose from the valley at their feet; and with all the resistlessness of a tornado, swept forward to storm the intrenchments of the River Rustlers.

It was so startling an outburst, and breathed so martial a spirit, that Jessie Durban drew her torn shawl about her head to shut out its rolling echoes.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ONE OF THE FALLEN.

SALMON PIKE sprang to his feet and strained his eyes through the gloom to catch a glimpse of the charging column. Durban, equally excited, leaped up beside him and looked in the same direction. Jessie, however, remained seated on the boulder, anxious to bar out all knowledge of what was transpiring.

To her, battles and charges were dreadful things. The revolution she had in part witnessed had presented itself as a horrible nightmare. And she could not forget, now, that Giles Jessup was in all probability leading those yelling men upon the camp of the bandits.

She hesitated to question what might be the result. That some men must fall seemed a cer-

tainty. Jessup did not bear a charmed life, and he might be one of the first to go down in that fiery depth. She shuttered at the thought, and drew the shawl closer about her.

Pike and Durban were not left long to strain their eyes without result. In a few moments, javelins of fire began to leap through the darkness, as the rifles spouted their contents; and within the haze of smoke and flame they could dimly see Jessup's men as they raced up the hillside.

To the River Rustlers, the attack was an overwhelming surprise. But their force was somewhat stronger than it had been the preceding day. A small section of the band had joined them only that evening, after the coming of darkness.

Notwithstanding the confusion into which they were naturally thrown by the suddenness of the assault, they rallied in a great measure; and, taking advantage of the breastworks of rock and earth, made a most stubborn and bitter resistance.

As the fight grew hotter and the explosions of musketry more frequent and deafening, Pike and Durban could gain a very fair idea of what was occurring, and of the chances of success or failure on the part of their friends.

The old man's desire to mingle in the fray manifested itself in various excited exclamations. He had promised Jessup, however, that he would remain with the Durbans, and this promise held him in check.

"I would give all the thousands that Joe Dobson stole from me to git a whack at them River Rustlers, jist now!" as the clamor of the conflict rose higher and higher.

They saw the assailing party climb the rocky wall and stream into the inclosure. Then the firing almost ceased, and they could no longer tell how the fight was progressing.

But other cries came soon after to show that the Rustlers had been beaten from their strongholds and were in wild retreat. The sounds of the pursuit were quite distinct from those they had been previously listening to. The bandits were fleeing in disorder, and Jessup's men were pressing them closely.

For a time the many noises of the chase came plainly. Then they grew fainter and fainter; and when a half-hour had passed, they ceased altogether.

No sounds came from the late camp of the outlaws.

"Ever'body's cleared out over there, 'ceptin' them what can't go!" with a deep and expressive sigh. "If you two will promise to stay hyer a while, I'll take a look at things."

Jessie shuddered at his words. What would that visit reveal? She feared to learn; and yet her nerves were strained by intense anxiety to their utmost tension.

As neither she nor her father offered any objection, Pike left them and clambered hastily across the intervening space.

As he climbed over the low intrenchment, a groan from a wounded man told him what he might expect to see. The camp-fire still smoldered; and gathering a bundle of twigs, he quickly formed them into a torch, which he lighted at the fire. With this in hand, he made a hasty survey of the ground.

He had taken but a few steps when he started back with a cry of dismay and anguish. He had experienced a terrible shock. Before him, stretched lifeless on the ground, his face badly disfigured by a bullet wound, was Giles Jessup!

"'Twill kill the girl!" he groaned, as he stooped toward the limp form. "'Twill jist everlastin'ly smash her heart into little pieces. My God! this hyer is awful!"

For a few minutes he stood rooted to the spot, held there by a horrible fascination. He had not thought of Jessup as one of the slain. He had only thought of him as the victorious leader who, flushed with success, was still pushing the pursuit. He could scarcely comprehend what it meant to find him there, dead!

He was about to turn away, when he was startled by a heart-rending shriek, which arose just behind him.

Jessie Durban had watched him as he searched the camp with his flaming torch; and when he halted so long, her fears became overwhelming.

Without requesting permission of her father, she hurried with wild steps over the rugged rocks. And now she was looking down, with Salmon Pike, upon the lifeless body of her lover.

Such a hopeless cry as came from her lips, the old man had never heard. It spoke of a breaking heart.

Durban, who had followed her rapidly, now arrived on the scene.

Pike turned, and grasping her half-fainting form, led her tenderly from the place.

"Don't go on that way," he said, in tones that were intended to be soothing. "You're jist a-killin' of me an' yer father a-doin' of it. It's terrible, I know! Terrible! But it can't be helped now!"

It is doubtful if she heard his words. She seemed to be walking in a dream. Her eyes were fixed and glassy, and her arms hung limp and helpless.

Pike had tossed away the torch. With Dur-

ban's aid he assisted her beyond the camp, and there used his utmost exertions to turn her mind from the dreadful calamity.

A number of men returned from the chase soon after, having become separated from the main body. They assisted Pike to catch and saddle some of the ponies in the valley below. It was Pike's intention to mount Jessie and her father, and to escort them to the Durban Ranch across the river.

He had no sooner arranged his details, however, than an event occurred which gave a new direction to his energies.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A HOT CHASE.

COATES FOSTER suddenly appeared near the camp, having ridden up without any premonitory warning. New wood had been placed on the fire by one of the men, and the increase of light revealed him plainly.

He was mounted on a jaded horse, and his own condition seemed little better than that of the animal he rode. He was hatless, and his clothing was torn.

As soon as he saw who composed the party near the camp, he wheeled his horse and made off.

"I'm a-goin' to git that feller!" Pike exclaimed with sudden fervor. "Will you fellers take keer o' the girl an' her paw? It jist won't do to let Coates Foster git away. He's the head-center o' more devilment than most people have ever dreamed of."

His appeal was so earnest that the men readily acquiesced.

Neither Jessie nor her father offered any protest. Jessie was too much consumed by her great grief to notice or care for what was taking place about her.

A pony was standing near, already saddled and bridled. Pike sprung to its back, and, giving it free rein, dashed in hot chase.

Foster had already gained some distance when the old man thundered in pursuit. But the sounds of his horse's feet came back plainly. These served to guide Pike.

The darkness of the night was giving way somewhat. The moon had recently risen, and the clouds that had overcast the sky began to dissipate.

Foster headed his animal straight for the open country, a fact which was very pleasing to Pike.

A dash of ten or fifteen minutes placed them beyond the broken region near the base of the Spanish Peak, and upon ground that was comparatively level.

The old man could now and then see Foster, as well as hear the hoof-beats of his horse. The race promised to be a long one. Foster had the advantage of a start, but Pike's pony was a fresh one, while Foster's was much blown.

Up to this time the pursued man did not seem to know that any one was following him. As soon as he made the discovery, he attempted by blows and commands to urge his horse to a faster pace. The obedient animal sprung forward at renewed speed—but only for a short time. Its strength was too greatly spent.

"Go 'lang, there!" Pike yelled, seeing that concealment would no longer serve him, and shouting the words so that Foster could hear them. "Go 'lang, there, you taller-faced rascal! Hump yourself! I'm a-crowdin' you like an engine chasin' a deer up a railroad track!"

Foster caught the words, and they did not tend to reassure him. He was mortally afraid of Pike. He knew, too, that his horse could not hold out against the one the old man was riding.

Again he belabored the straining animal, forcing it forward at an utterly reckless pace. If he could place a sufficient distance between himself and his pursuer, he believed he could yet escape.

If he had had a revolver, he would have used it, in the hope of wounding Pike or crippling his pony. But his only weapon was a knife.

After a run of a half a mile or more, and when passing through a grove of mesquite, he tried the ruse he had counted on to aid him. He slipped from the pony, and after giving it a cut to send it on, crouched in hiding.

How he cursed the moon, which was mounting higher and higher and sending its gentle beams through the meshes of the branches above his head. Would it reveal him to the man who was thundering along on his trail? There was some grass near, and this he drew about and over him.

Salmon Pike smiled grimly as he approached Foster's hiding-place. Foster's plan of escape was so old a one that Pike had been expecting him to try it. He especially expected him to make the attempt at this little grove, if at all, because of the cover it afforded. By listening intently, his keen ear detected the difference in the sounds of the hoof-beats after Foster dismounted; and he was thus able to guess very accurately the point at which Foster had gone into hiding.

Yet he came straight on, anxious to give no sign of his suspicions.

Foster had feared to go far; and so he lay not six feet from the trail, aquiver with excitement and scarcely daring to draw a full breath.

To his intense surprise and terror, Pike veered

at the very point where he had slipped from the saddle, and rode straight toward him.

The horse-pistol came out like a flash, and covered him.

"Git up from that!" came the stern command; and Foster could no longer hug to his heart a hope of escape.

"Git out o' that!" sharply and commandingly, giving the weapon an ominous click. "Rise up, William Allan, an' come along o' me! Ye never heerd that song, I reckon? It makes appropriate music fer the present jubilee."

Foster, instead of obeying, uttered an exclamation of fright, and sought to escape by running. Such an effort was wholly useless, however, as he must have known if he had been given time for thought. He fled on impulse, like a frightened animal.

"No, you don't!" Pike cried, racing his pony after Foster and threatening him with his big pistol. "You don't come no games on me; an' if you hain't got yer life insured fer a big amount, you'd better stop!"

Foster paid no sort of heed to these words, but ran on, dodging in and out among the low-growing and lacerating mesquite trees. Pike pursued him thus for some time. But he grew tired of it, and hurled his heavy pistol.

The weapon struck Foster between the shoulders and knocked him down, and before he had time to rise or get out his knife, the old man was upon him.

A fierce but short fight followed, in which Pike came off victor. But he was compelled to give his antagonist a number of taps on the head with a stick he had grasped.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" the bruised and terrified man pleaded, putting up his hands.

"Glad you're comin' aroun' sensible!" rising to his feet and securing the horse-pistol which lay on the ground near. "I sha'n't even hurt you unless ye make me do it. But, they's bullets a-restin' in this hyer thing jist like a settin' o' blue eggs, an' I'll put ever' one o' 'em into your wuthless hide if ye force me to do it. You'll wish I had killed ye, though, 'fore I git through with you, I reckon!"

"What do you mean to do with me?" Foster anxiously asked, as he got up in obedience to the old man's commands.

"You're wanted, Mr. Foster, an' you're wanted bad!"

Foster shivered as he put out his hands and submissively allowed Pike to bind them. He was crushed, and all of the courage he had at times manifested seemed to have left him. His manner was that of a whipped and whining cur.

"Where am I goin' to take you?" said Pike, in answer to one of his fearful questions. "I'm a-goin' to take you to Durban's ranch, fu'st place! That's enough fer you to know now. Don't question the future. You'll live happier fer it!"

Pike hoped he might be able to intercept the party who were escorting the Durban's home, and with this hope set out with his captive. He rode the pony, and compelled Foster to walk on in advance. Urging him into a quick gait and constantly threatening him with the big revolver.

CHAPTER L.

AS FROM THE DEAD.

A FEELING of sadness and sorrow pervaded the Durban ranch-house. It had been found deserted. The ponies were gone from the corrals and pastures, and the cattle, if any remained of them, had wandered far off on the range.

It was a desolate home-coming to Durban and his daughter. The death of Giles Jessup had cast a shadow over everything. Jessie was no longer her old happy, joyous self. She was listless and dispirited, taking no interest in anything about her. She went at once to her room, and remained there, silent and almost motionless. She was a heart-broken woman.

Two of the men who had accompanied them home—Pike had not succeeded in joining them—volunteered to return to the camp of the outlaws, and bring in Jessup's body, that it might be given decent burial. They were away, now.

Jessie was aroused from her death-like stillness by the clatter of many hoofs, and a pleased and triumphant shout from her father. Her window overlooked the valley and river, and the hills beyond. She glanced out; and as her glance fell upon the approaching horsemen she leaped up white and trembling.

"My God! It cannot be!" with bloodless and faltering lips, and clutching at the window to prevent herself from falling in a swoon. Her brain reeled, strange noises hummed in her ears, and a mist that blotted out everything swam before her sight.

With a great effort she recovered in a measure, and looked again.

"It is he!" she screamed, in a very hysteria. "It is he! Or, oh, God!—am I dreaming?"

What she beheld may well have aroused distrust in her senses.

Seated on one of the horses, erect and stalwart, and as full of life as ever, was Giles Jessup! There was no wound on his handsome face—no indication that he had ever been injured.

With steps as light as thistle-down, Jessie Durban flew down the stairway and out on the prairie. Her father was in advance of her, also running toward Jessup with every indication of frenzied joy.

Jessup drew up in a laughing way before them.

There could be no mistake! It was Jessup; alive and well!

The girl could endure the strain no longer. She reeled and fell into her father's arms.

Jessup sprung down and assisted in supporting her.

"Help me in getting her into the house," he said, quietly, to Durban. "I have a story to tell, which will bear waiting till she recovers."

There was deep anxiety in his face, as well as a look not so easily described. He knew by intuition what had caused the swoon; and his heart bounded as he looked down into the pale face of the girl reclining against his breast. Jessie Durban loved him! He felt it—he knew it! And he esteemed that love more than victories or wealth.

Durban, since his return to the ranch, had regained in a large degree his former feelings and characteristics. His apathy had passed away with the restoration of his liberty; and though affairs at the ranch were in a deplorable state, the fact that he was safe and at home worked wonders.

He was not so blind but that he knew of the regard of the young people for each other; and as soon as Jessie had sufficiently recovered to no longer require his presence and attention, he discreetly retreated to the outside, to question the cowboys concerning the mystery presented in Jessup's reappearance.

The story he learned, was rather a strange one:

The man slain in the fight, and whom all supposed to be Giles Jessup, was a cousin of Jessup's. He had belonged to the band that had trained under El Espada, and with his comrades had supported the insurrectionary movement.

For some time previous to the fight near the Spanish Peak, he with a few others, had been doing courier duty for the rebels at a point further south than the field covered by the incidents of this story. Only a few hours before the fight had he returned and rejoined the portion of the band under Coates Foster.

Jessup did not know of his cousin's presence there, at the time of the fight, nor did he learn of his death for a number of hours afterward. If he had become informed of the latter, he might have taken means to avert the distressing mistake into which Jessie and her father, and others, fell.

The presence in the band and the actions of this cousin largely occasioned all the mystery of this story. The cousin and Jessup were almost counterparts in looks and manners, in voice and speech.

It was the cousin, Salmon Pike saw, in the dug-out in the mountains in conversation with El Espada. He had been secreted near the trail Jessup and Pike were following, and had heard Pike state that he intended to trail the River Rustlers to their lair in the mountains, and this it was which caused him to suggest to El Espada that Pike was probably prowling about.

Jessup knew that his cousin was one of Peel Skinner's men, and had endeavored to hold secret communication with him, hoping to draw him back to a life of honesty. He was prompted to this by a regard for the mother of the renegade. He remembered her as a kind, motherly woman. She had been long dead, and was thus spared the knowledge of the downfall of her beloved son. This son had always been a wayward boy—one of the boys who fancy in their ignorance and folly that there are better places in the world than home, and kinder and better people than those who daily associate under the old roof-tree. He found out his mistake too late.

This desire of Jessup's will explain his many strange absences from the ranch. It was a matter involving some family pride, and he did not wish to reveal its secret to any one.

The incendiary fire that consumed Foster's ranch-house was kindled by Dominique Gervase. It was a blow aimed by him directly at Jessup, whom he bitterly hated because the latter had supplanted him in the lieutenantcy of the command sent out from Carmencita to look for the outlaws. He knew of the feeling existing between Jessup and Foster, and was therefore convinced that the crime would be charged on Jessup.

When Jessup was taken before the alcalde, it was Foster's influence which caused Francisco to release him so unfairly and with only the form of a trial. As Foster and Francisco were both members of Skinner's band, and acquainted with each other as such, this was not difficult for Foster to do. And his object was to convince the world that Jessup was one of the River Rustlers, and thus ruin him in the eyes of all honest people.

The letter that Salmon Pike found at the mountain cabin, together with the other letters purporting to be from Jessup to El Espada, was a skillful forgery performed by Jessup's own

cousin. And the sole reason Gervase released Pike at that time, was to make him believe Jessup a member of the band.

All of the mysterious incidents were in fact no more than a series of acts aimed at Jessup by his enemies.

Jessup's cousin, together with the others who fell in the Spanish Peak fight, had been buried there by Jessup and his men on their return from the chase. They had succeeded in capturing only a few of the bandits, the greater number of these escaping into the mountains, aided by the darkness. But the leaders were all taken or killed, and in due course of time the remainder were forced to leave the country.

But, Jessup was not thinking of any of these things, as he sat in the little room to which Jessie Durban had been borne, and heard from her lips the explanation of her agitation.

"My dear!" and he boldly placed an arm about her waist. "Shall we try to longer keep from each other the fact of our mutual love? I love you, Jessie, better than I do my own life, and I feel that you bear for me no ordinary regard. Is it not true? You do love me?"

"I do!" she said, with strange solemnity, and without any evasion. "And I feel that God has given you back to me, after I thought you lost forever!"

He bent over, folded her in a closer embrace, and imprinted on her trembling lips a kiss.

Salmon Pike arrived not long after with his prisoner, Coates Foster. It transpired that Foster was the direct cause of Pike's coming to the Rio Grande region. Foster's Ranch had been purchased and stocked with the proceeds of a gigantic swindle, for which he was badly "wanted" in the East.

Pedro Francisco was sentenced to hard labor for a number of years and then condemned to banishment by the Mexican Government. He had expected death! And though permitted to prolong his miserable existence, the circumstances attending this act of mercy—if it may so be deemed—forced him to a terrible expiation for his misdeeds.

Salmon Pike, the irrepressible—the original—the great detective from 'Way-Back, as he was ever afterward known—had the supreme pleasure of escorting Coates Foster back to the scene of his crime, and of there being the instrument of visiting on him the just punishment of the law. At Sing Sing, in the great State of New York, may to-day be seen a bowed and gray prisoner. Though he would not be so recognized, this man is the once dashing, reckless, cruel Coates Foster. He sowed the wind and he reaped the whirlwind!

Jessie Durban is now, and has been for many years, Mrs. Jessie Jessup. They were united in marriage very shortly after the close of the Mexican revolution. Several bright and handsome children, some of them almost grown to manhood and womanhood, now grace the old Durban ranch, and assist in its duties. Jessup is no longer foreman—he has a large interest in the ranch lands, as well as in the herds, and is prospering in a manner equal to his most sanguine anticipations. Sylvester Durban is still alive, enjoying a hale and serene old age.

"May they all live long and prosper!" And, with this benediction from the jolly, careless old Vagabond of the Catskills, we leave them!

THE END.

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